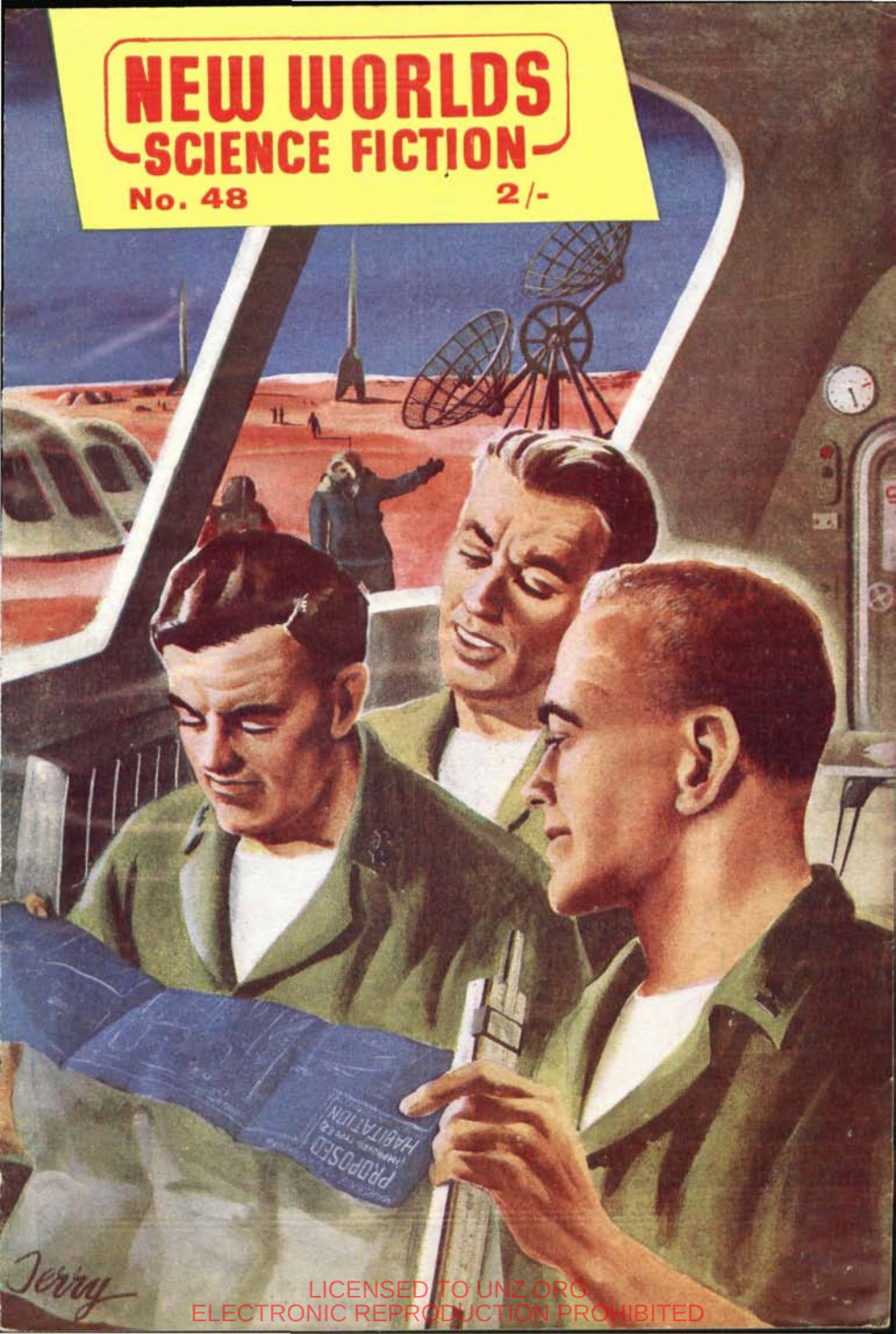

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NEW WORLDS

PROFILES

Leslie Flood

London

Our regular book reviewer has been closely connected with *New Worlds* since its early days and his lifelong enthusiasm for science fiction found a further outlet in the International Fantasy Award for which he has been responsible since its inception in 1951.

"Potted biographies," he writes, "are usually excuses for parading personal statistics—such as being 34 years old, 14 of them married. This is then followed by an admission that a promising scholastic career was spoilt by a yen for the wonders of science and science fiction, ruined by the advent of World War II. and an overseas tour with the R.A.F. Not wishing to adhere to this tradition I will merely say that science fiction was the beacon that brought me out of earning a living the dull way and finally into bookselling. Recently I achieved a major ambition by going into business on my own with a West Central London Shop specialising in science fiction and jazz—both very much to my taste.

"Reviewing science fiction followed naturally from an inability to write a story myself — having read so much in the fantasy field I couldn't think of an original idea, or write a sentence without unconscious plagiarism. I sincerely hope that I am succeeding in the impossible task of pleasing readers, authors, publishers — *and* my conscience."

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About Books and Authors

As predicted in our April issue, British publishers will not produce many new science fiction titles in book form this year. This is largely due to a general slowing down in the field—fewer titles spread over a longer period of time, plus a number of publishers withdrawing entirely from this type of literature. The fact that during 1955 there was a big decrease in the number of titles published in U.S.A. could also have some bearing on the fact ; and 1956, so far, doesn't look like producing as many even as last year. However, there are a number of outstanding novels listed for production on both sides of the Atlantic, from which it is almost certain that next year's International Fantasy Award winner will be taken.

The book with the largest amount of promotion in America is the Harcourt, Brace edition of Arthur Clarke's *The City And The Stars*, coming from Frederick Muller in June. This is undoubtedly Arthur's greatest literary effort to date and will undoubtedly be hailed as a Stapledonian epic in the modern vein—which is just what both author and publisher hope for. However, many regular readers of science fiction are going to be bitterly disappointed in the plot at least, for it is an expansion of his several-times-published *Against The Fall Of Night*—originally a short novelette in *Startling Stories*, 1948, then as a book by Gnome Press in 1953, and subsequently a Perma pocketbook in 1954.

In a preface Arthur explains that he felt the original book version was immature and that science had advanced greatly since he originally drafted the theme, and that he has only used about one-fifth of the original book in the new novel. Though this may be so, readers will find little difference in the general plot except for the ending, and the "poetry" of the author's work in the earlier version (which brought him so many favourable Press notices) is missing. However, neither the British nor the American publisher is listing the title under "science fiction" and it will undoubtedly reach out to a far wider audience than it normally would, where most of the readers will not be familiar with the novel's history. It is certainly the first time in science fiction publishing that an already-published novel has been rewritten and published again, and that fact alone makes it an historical occasion.

After an absence of several years, Alfred Bester has a new novel scheduled. The British edition from Sidgwick & Jackson in June will be called *Tiger, Tiger*, while in America it has been listed as *The Burning Spear* by the *Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* where it will be serialised shortly. I had the pleasure of reading this novel

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in MS form last year when Mr. Bester was in London and at his request suggested a number of changes which were eventually incorporated—but we never did agree about the ending. It is interesting to note that Anthony Boucher in the June issue of *F. & S.F.* states that "Mr. Bester was attacked by some striking creative afterthoughts." I hope that they included a different end to the one which will appear in the British edition.

This new novel is in the writing tradition set by Mr. Bester's *The Demolished Man*, but it is not a scientific detective story.

Also after a long absence and following his European tour last year, Robert A. Heinlein has a powerful new book just published by Doubleday, entitled *Double Star*, which has been running as a serial in *Astounding*. This is his first adult novel since *The Puppet Masters* and is as good if not better than that first-class story, although up to the time of writing this editorial no British publisher has been offered the Rights.

A new author to the fantasy field is John Mantley whose first novel *The 27th Day* will be published by Michael Joseph this Autumn. The book is already piling up fame before publication, having been bought as a film by one of Columbia's subsidiary companies, giving Mr. Mantley the opportunity of leaving film directing in Rome to go to Hollywood and write the film script, production upon which started this month. Since then E. P. Dutton have bought the American book Rights and the story is likely to appear in serial form in many parts of the world.

T. V. Boardman's next two titles, *Galactic Patrol* by E. E. Smith (third in the "Lensman" series) and Isaac Asimov's *To The End Of Eternity*, which have both been announced as forthcoming will probably not be published before the end of the year.

Eyre & Spottiswoode have an interesting book coming which may be something in the nature of an experiment. Listed for November is *Sometime, Never*—a collection of three new novelettes by different authors—John Wyndham, William Golding, and Mervyn Peake, the latter you may remember was the author of that creepy Gothic novel *Titus Groan*. Meanwhile, Faber & Faber, who have just published *Earthman, Come Home* by James Blish, are going ahead compiling another *Best S-F* under the editorship of Edmund Crispin.

But the big book of the year is the non-fiction *The Exploration Of Mars* by Willy Ley and Chesley Bonestell, to be published by Viking in U.S.A., and Sidgwick & Jackson in London, containing many fine new colour paintings by Bonestell.

It may not be a prolific year ahead—but at least it looks very interesting.

John Carnell

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Stories concerning humanity being used by some extra-terrestrial intelligence are becoming more and more popular, but it requires a skilful blend of ideas and literary ability for the author to successfully weld the two together. We think that Alan Barclay has mastered the technique in the following story.

THE REFUGEE

By Alan Barclay

Illustrated by QUINN.

The planet circled the star Alpha in the Constellation of the Ram. Alpha of the Ram had sixteen planets, many of them pleasant agreeable places, but this one was a bare nobbly chunk of atmosphereless rock.

On the floor of a wide fissure in the surface of the planet there stood three ships that had come down out of space. They were immense, with weapon turrets and other warlike devices Earth-people would not have recognised. They had been in action not long ago; their huge sides were scarred and patched and some of the weapon-turrets were smashed and crumpled.

All serviceable weapons were turned upwards towards the dark sky. Somewhere above, perhaps two thousand miles up, the victorious fleet waited.

One of the three battered grounded vessels was called *The Golden Flower*—a council of officers was in progress in its Captain's cabin. The unseen enemy above had presented them with an ultimatum: "Surrender unconditionally within two hours, or we'll blast you to dust."

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The officers assembled in *The Golden Flower* knew with complete certainty that there were no alternatives available to them. If they did not surrender, the enemy would attack. Perhaps they would succeed in blowing two or three of the attackers out of the sky as they swept down, but the end would be swift after that.

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The Captain sat with the two other Captains beside him. They looked round the long curve of the table and listened to the buzz of conversation. Considering the circumstances, the faces of the officers —some young, others old and grizzled—looked remarkably tranquil and composed. The fact was, they had fought a long and weary war, years in space, years of retreat, battle, and then retreat once more. They had fought their battles as well as they knew how, and now they had reached the end. It was not a very satisfactory end to be sure, but it was an end—an end to struggle and sweat and continual defeat.

The Captain of *The Golden Flower* tapped on the table.

"Can I have an opinion?" he asked.

There was a louder buzz of talk, and then a junior officer, Gunnery Branch by his badges, said respectfully:

"If you please, sir . . . My opinion—the opinion of several junior officers is this: We have fought the Troll-Angar over ten systems; our home planets were subdued and occupied ten years ago; all our allies are defeated; there are no other ships out against them; the game has been played right out to the end and there is nothing more to be done . . . Now we would like to surrender. We don't know exactly what will happen to us if we do, but it seems possible that some may live to return home, to see our relatives, and share their difficulties . . ."

The young man spoke respectfully, and everyone paid him proper attention. Another man, at the other end of the conference table, stood up.

"These are good reasons," he stated, "but not good enough. If we surrender unconditionally, we may be allowed to live, but the rest of our lives will be miserable. If, on the other hand, we fight one last fight, then, even though not a man of us survives, it will become known that we believed so greatly in liberty that we preferred to die rather than live without it. I say let us fight."

"I agree," another exclaimed. "To live? . . . What for? The whole Confederation has been over-run; all opposition has been destroyed . . . On my own planet the Inquisitors are busy sniffing out every person who might have the least will to revolt. If I could see even a faint chance of armed opposition to the Troll-Angar, I would be ready to spend twenty years in misery waiting to play my part, but I don't. The Confederation is finished—and we cannot expect help from outside. There is nothing left but a few minor systems, populated by semi-barbarous races who could not resist the Troll-Angar for a single day. They also will be discovered and overwhelmed just as soon as the Troll-Angar consolidate their present gains and feel themselves driven to further expansion. Everything has come to an end. My wish is to reach an end also in one last fight."

The speaker sat down.

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Another officer rose. He was young and handsome, a scout-pilot.

"This is my opinion," he stated formally. "I am as much opposed to the idea of a lifetime in labour camps as anyone here, and I therefore say, let us fight. But," he added, "during the fight let those who can, escape in the scouts."

This drew cries of protest, even angry exclamations. The speaker raised his hand. "I know," he agreed, "there are ten scouts per ship—only thirty in all. Let us draw lots to see who shall go off in them."

"But where will you go? The scouts can't take you right out of the system. You'll be shot down like pigeons as you rise . . ."

"I don't think many will escape," the young man agreed, "perhaps only half a dozen. But if all the food and fuel we carry in *The Gentle Flower* were transferred to the scouts, each scout would then have a slender chance of getting clean away."

"But where to?" someone queried.

"Anywhere—right outside."

But this idea was not at all favourably received. Although many more spoke in favour of a last brief heroic fight than in favour of surrender, nevertheless when the matter was put to the vote is was found that a large number of men preferred the latter course. They wanted at least a chance to get back eventually to their own homes.

The senior Captain concluded:

"Very well, gentlemen," he agreed sadly. "We agree to surrender. I will inform the ships' crews, and I'll send a signal up to the enemy above."

The Troll-Angar acknowledged briefly, ordered all weapon-mountings to be retracted inboard, and intimated that one of their ships would land alongside in half-an-hour. Almost immediately after this signal had been received and acknowledged, the officer who had proposed an attempt to escape in the scouts reported to the Captain.

"Ah!" the Captain said, "you were the young fellow who proposed to escape while your comrades fought it out." He was not very cordial.

"Yes, sir." The young fellow remained at attention.

"Well?"

"I wish respectfully to refer to Clause 127 of Service Regulations, sir, which says that any officer having served ten years with the Space Forces may resign his commission and be provided with transportation at service expense back to his home planet. I do therefore hereby tender my resignation, and do request transportation as laid down by regulations."

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"What is this nonsense?" the Captain exclaimed testily. "Have you gone out of your mind? There is some such regulation I know, but it does not apply during hostilities. One can't have officers resigning in the midst of an action. Now leave."

"Sir," the other replied stiffly, "respectfully point out that since the moment surrender was agreed, it may be considered that hostilities have ended."

"Very well," the Captain agreed with some contempt. "Your resignation accepted." He thought the fellow was hoping to get better treatment from the enemy as a civilian. "Now will you go? I have work to deal with."

"One thing more, sir," the other persisted. "I am entitled to transportation to my own planet."

"Have you gone out of your mind, boy?" the old man exclaimed. "You know very well . . ."

"I am prepared to accept one of the scout ships on loan, in lieu of ordinary transport."

"Ah! Ah!" the Captain exclaimed, a little more cordially. "But I'm required to surrender with all hands . . . But yet . . . I see . . . You're now a civilian . . . Very well . . . You may take the ship."

"Fuelled and equipped with stores?"

"Certainly. Though I think you'll never get past the screen of ships overhead."

The Captain thought the young fellow was rather second-rate, but he flipped an intercom switch and gave the necessary orders.

The Troll-Angar ship came down about five miles away, and swung its armament to bear upon them. Then the three surrendering ships were ordered to parade their personnel outside, officers in one group, other ranks in another. The planet was airless, so this entailed a hurried issuing of pressure suits.

When the entire personnel had been assembled beneath the towering hulls of the three ships, a swarm of figures emerged from the enemy vessel. The majority, in squads under the charge of officers, climbed aboard *The Golden Flower* and her companions. A formation of armed men marched towards the waiting group.

The officer in charge came briskly up to the three Captains, who stood side by side in front of their men. The face of the enemy could not be seen very clearly inside his pressure helmet, but his voice sounded ordinary enough, impersonal, business-like.

"All officers present?" he asked.

"Certainly," the Captain answered, reminding himself that the young scalliwag now hiding in the rear hold of *The Golden Flower* was no longer a serving officer.

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" You will wait," the enemy told him. " Our prize-crews are taking over your ships. You will wait till we make sure that nothing has been sabotaged."

" May I remind you that we've had to fit every man with a pressure suit at short notice, so that none of us has a very large supply of oxygen" the Captain told him.

" You will wait," the other repeated inexorably. Behind him stood a file of armed men, weapons ready to enforce his command.

The prize-crews took about half-an-hour to familiarize themselves with the three ships, and at the end of that time the main jets fired and all three soared aloft.

At this moment, as they watched their own ships disappear, a vague horrible fear began to invade the minds of the assembled men. No sooner had the ships become vanishing dots in the sky than the enemy officer received a short order on his intercom. He wheeled immediately and barked something to his file of men.

The men wheeled briskly and marched back towards their own ship.

" But . . . but . . ." the Captain exclaimed. Then he strode after the enemy officer, overtook him and put a gloved hand on his shoulder.

" May I ask, sir . . ." he began. Everyone heard his words over their suit radios.

The officer turned and without pause or hesitation shot him dead.

The enemy's intention now became plain to all. They were simply to be left on this rocky barren planet, with only an hour's supply of oxygen apiece. Understanding of this horrible fact swept through the whole assembly almost at the same instant, and they surged forward in the direction of the retreating file of men. As they drew near the officer barked an order, the men turned smartly, knelt, and began firing.

Figures fell and lay twisting and struggling for a moment. The armed men rose and trotted briskly towards their ship, turned and fired again, trotted back another fifty yards, turned and fired. A frantic horde of desperate men swarmed after them, leaving a trail of black figures on the sand.

The soldiers reached their ship. Their discipline was good. Four by four they entered the lift tube, and were whisked aloft while their companions kept firing steadily. The officer was the last to disappear, firing coolly at the nearest figures, until the metal door closed upon him.

The crowd trampled over their fallen companions and beat at the metal of the ship—but only for a few minutes, until the jets fired and poured flame down upon them.

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Lieutenant—ex-Lieutenant to be correct—Anstar knew nothing of this. He lay in the ammunition locker of a scout ship inside the great belly of *The Golden Flower*. He knew that the ship had lifted into space. Later, he knew it was riding free.

He could not delay his escape, for it was unthinkable that an enemy taking over such a ship would fail to make a very thorough inspection. He made his preparations. First of all, he did a number of unorthodox things to the other five ships lying in the racks. Then he made a setting on the mechanism which opened the exit hatch. Finally he returned to his own scout. He sat in the control seat and looked out ahead. First he saw only the metal wall of the hold, but presently, as the mechanism he had set came into action this wall swung ponderously down till he was looking out into a rectangle of space spotted with stars.

He fired his jets and shot into the open. A quick look about him—he saw the mass of the enemy fleet right ahead—he had no special plan, no sure-fire way of escape, he did not even have much hope of success. He turned the taps up to three G, and streaked for the fleet. In a minute he was weaving and twisting among the big ships. He was lucky. They were in close order so they could not fire at him without risk of hitting one another, and they were not expecting an incident of this sort anyway. He passed right through them and out into black space, and presently the little blob his ship made on their radar screens dwindled to a speck and disappeared.

When the Troll-Angar learned how he had managed the escape they laughed—for what chance had he, out in deep space in a little scout? And if he turned back to an occupied planet of the Confederation, he would be spotted and picked up without much difficulty.

One very cold afternoon in February, in the year 1963, Anstar was sitting in his car outside an office building in north London. Had anyone asked him to explain who he was—though there was no reason why anyone should—he could have demonstrated that he was Mr. Stanley Edward Sebastian, B.Sc., A.M.I.Mech.E., Consulting Engineer of Manchester, England; aged forty-two; born in the island of Trinidad. Each of these details was verifiable beyond any shadow of doubt, except perhaps the circumstances of his birth, but after all the registration of births in Trinidad among people of mixed parentage was extremely lax.

Anstar had been Stanley Sebastian for nearly thirty years now. For nearly fifty years before that he had been a French Creole called Furneaux. Still earlier, while he was struggling to adapt himself to Earth conditions and to learn its languages he had changed his name

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frequently and had been in a number of difficult situations. Nowadays he was never in any danger of discovery. He spoke French, English and Spanish fluently, his present identity was beyond question, and he knew a great deal more about the Earth and its peoples and their ways than most of its inhabitants, which is not particularly surprising, since he had been living on it and travelling about in it for a hundred and forty-eight years. He had brought his ship down through Earth's atmosphere on to the island of St. Kitt's in the Leeward Islands three days before Napoleon was defeated at Waterloo.

On this particular day in 1963 he was listening to a radio loudspeaker on the dashboard of his car. The set which operated the speaker was of perfectly orthodox construction by Earth standards, though rather powerful for a car radio, but the speech coming from it was in a language no Earthman had ever heard.

Anstar knew the stuff was originating from some part of the office building on the other side of the street. It was being shot vertically upwards on a very narrow beam, and it was only because he was so close to it that he was able to pick up anything at all. It had taken him three months to find the source of these broadcasts.

He listened to the stream of reports, figures and comment for about half an hour, then switched off. He got out of the car and walked a hundred yards back along the street. Here another car, a powerful heavy vehicle was standing, its driver seated at the wheel. The latter wound down the window.

"He'll come out of that doorway in about ten minutes," Anstar said. "I'll signal with my hand—like this—when he appears. After you have done what I ask, there will be no need for us to meet again. Here's the money."

He passed a thick wad of five-pound notes to the man, and without another word walked back to his own car.

In rather less than ten minutes a man emerged from the office building opposite. He was a man of medium height, rather foreign in appearance, with a confident, almost arrogant manner.

Anstar chopped his hand down sharply. The man stepped off the pavement and began to cross the road. A car engine started up, accelerated hard in bottom, then changed swiftly to second.

Anstar stood on the pavement watching, his face expressionless. He thought that a human being, accustomed to road traffic, might have leapt clear. In this case however a headlight struck the victim in the small of the back and threw him forward against a lamp-post. He fell within three yards of Anstar.

The man—actually it may not be quite correct to call him a man—was still alive, for he was rather more robustly built than a human-

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being. He looked up into Anstar's face, and a flicker of recognition lighted his eyes.

"Greetings—and goodbye," Anstar said softly, looking at the man without compassion.

He watched the Troll-Angar die.

The black car had disappeared. A policeman came running up.

"Entirely his own fault, I'm afraid, officer," Anstar told him. "He ran out into the road without paying attention. He's quite dead."

"Did you get the number of the car that hit him, sir?" the policeman asked. "Or can you give a description of it?"

"I've no very clear impression of it," Anstar said regretfully.

A crowd gathered. Someone went to telephone for an ambulance.

As he stood answering the policeman's questions, Anstar saw two men emerge from the office doorway across the road. They edged their way through into the middle of the crowd until they could see the dead man. Out of the corner of his eye Anstar saw them look down at him woodenly.

"We must get the body out of their hands," one of these men said to the other. "If they examine it something might be discovered." He spoke in a language Anstar alone understood.

The ambulance arrived; the man's body was put aboard it and the crowd began to disperse.

"What happens to the body?" Anstar asked the policeman.

"It's taken to the Police-Station mortuary. Presently it will be identified and claimed by relatives, I've no doubt."

"Will you do a post-mortem?" Anstar asked.

"Shouldn't think so, sir," the policeman told him. "Poor fellow's back's broken—that's plain enough."

Anstar walked along to his own car and got in behind the wheel. He sat there for a few moments, then started the engine and drove off. He drove slowly northwards for a while, then circled round first east, then south then west until he found himself back where he had started He asked to be directed to the local Police-station. He went inside.

"My name is Sebastian," he told the desk Sergeant. "I was a witness to a fatal street accident about an hour ago, and gave my name and an account of the occurrence to a policeman."

"Well, sir?"

"While I was on my way home afterwards I remembered something which I thought I should report to you—so I came back here."

"Very good of you, sir. What was the thing you remembered?"

"Simply this—while I was standing among the crowd of people—the policeman was busy with someone else just then—I became aware

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of two men standing just behind me. One of them said to the other, 'We must get the body away from the police . . If they examine it something may be discovered.' "

Up to that moment the Sergeant had been merely polite; now he showed genuine interest.

"You're sure they said that?"

"I don't guarantee every word, but I was most certainly not mistaken about their meaning."

The Sergeant saw that Anstar was a level-headed, educated sort of man.

"I understand, sir. I think your information may be very valuable indeed and you can count on our treating it seriously. Have you formed any theory as to why these two men might not want the police to examine the body?"

"The remark suggests that the dead man was involved in something illegal, that much is obvious. Perhaps he was one of a gang. Perhaps he was a drug addict, or perhaps he was doped when the car hit him. But this is mere speculation. I feel it's your job to look into this and form the theories." He smiled as he said this.

"Quite right, sir, and you may be sure we shall. And thank-you for reporting this to us."

Anstar owned a house in Shropshire, about forty miles south of Manchester. He had become a wealthy man by this time, but he lived very much alone. When he had first arrived on Earth he had thought it might be possible to make himself at home among the natives, perhaps even to marry one of the girls, but he found himself unable to like them. Although he admired their courage and self-confidence, they were ignorant, aggressive and opinionated. They were, of course, very short-lived by the standards of his race, but it was their fierce combativeness more than anything else that made him dislike them. Even the young women, though some were exceedingly good-looking, were too alien to attract him.

He was possibly one of the loneliest individuals in the universe. But he had lived and waited all these years, knowing that some day the Troll-Angar would come.

And at last they were here.

Next day he searched the London papers for any account of the incident of the evening before, but to his great disappointment found only a brief description of it. There was nothing said about any attempt to remove the body of the dead man, nothing about any scuffle or disturbance at a police-station.

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Thus Anstar was left quite in the dark. Perhaps the body had been carefully examined, in which case the authorities surely could not fail to discover that the victim was non-human. Perhaps their governments were stirring; perhaps their Secret Service was already on the hunt for others of the same sort. But perhaps they had not examined the body—or examined it and noticed nothing—or examined it and deduced that this was a human freak. He had a powerful inclination to make further enquiries, but realised this might be extremely dangerous to himself.

For some time Anstar had been employing a private enquiry agent to keep watch on the Troll-Angar spies. He did not like the fellow very much, but he was efficient in a ferret-like way. One day this man—his name was Hennesay—visited him to make his report.

"Well, Mr. Sebastian," Hennesay began, "just after I made my last report to you one of these men was killed by a hit-and-run car. Did you know that, sir?"

Anstar looked at the fellow and wondered how much he knew or suspected.

"Of course not," he replied. "How should I?"

The man glanced up from his notes. "I dunno, Mr. Sebastian. It just occurred to me you might. Anyway, one of those three were killed, but the other two seem to have gone about their business as if nothing had happened. They buy a lot of technical papers, and journals dealing with population statistics, trade figures, food production and things like that. I've got a list of the journals they read if you like . . . ?"

"Never mind . . . I know the sort of information they're collecting. Do they use their transmitter much?"

"Only about once a week."

"Do they send out or receive any mail?"

"None to this country, but they've sent letters to an address in Chicago several times; and they've had two from Paris, five from India—and . . ."

"I see. Give me a list of these addresses. They're important. What else do they do?"

"Twice they've gone off for a sort of holiday to an out-of-the-way place in the north-west highlands of Scotland."

"What do they do there?"

"That's a big mystery, sir. They walk up a cart-track into the mountains and disappear—and when I say disappear, sir, I mean disappear. They vanish. They stay vanished for about two days then they reappear. They just come sauntering down to the road, carrying their bags and set off back to London."

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"They do this regularly?"

"Three times so far, at intervals of a month. I drew your attention to it in my last report. You told me not to ferret round too close."

"Yes, I remember. When might they make their next trip?"

"In about a week's time if they run to schedule."

"Very well, Mr. Hennesay . . . I'll go up to this place to-morrow and stay in the local hotel. When you see these two leave London in that direction, send me a telegram. And please mark on the map as nearly as you can the spot where they disappear.

"Very good, sir, I'll do that. And—may I ask something, sir?"

"Anything you like."

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"I've had a long experience in the private enquiry business. I've investigated everything from commercial spying to white-slaving, but this case has me foxed. Would you care to give me some idea what it's about, Mr. Sebāstian?"

"I can't do that," Anstar replied, briefly.

"This stuff I report to you seems to make sense to you all right."

"It does, of course, but I can't let you in on it. Sorry."

"I can't afford to be involved in anything shady, Mr. Sebastian." Hennesay persisted. "The police in this country don't think very highly of enquiry agents. You're not English yourself, are you, Mr. Sebastian?"

"I've a British pass-port," Anstar told him. "I was born in Trinidad. I'm of mixed Chinese, French, Spanish and Indian stock, which accounts for my un-English appearance. But if you have doubts about this work you're doing for me, perhaps you'd like to drop it?"

"Of course not, Mr. Sebastian," Hennesay said hastily. "I'm just naturally puzzled, that's all."

Anstar hired a private plane to take him north, and registered at the only hotel in Achnabruich. The day after his arrival he walked up the road—it was only little more than a cart-track—into the hills westward towards the spot marked by Hennesay on the map.

The thing was very carefully concealed, but as he knew what he was looking for, and knew also a good deal about the methods and techniques of the Troll-Angar, he found the place after two days of searching.

It was no temporary, make-shift hiding-place. A cave of considerable size had been hollowed out of the rock with atomic cutters. Its entrance was concealed by a large slab of rock which was pivoted to form a swinging door. Inside this cave was a space-craft.

He spent a couple of hours examining the ship and familiarising himself with the control gear. It was a wingless craft, with anti-grav motors, and fully pressurised for space. It was only about sixty feet in length and certainly not a long-range craft, but this did not surprise Anstar because he knew one of the Troll-Angar's big exploration ships must be in orbit somewhere overhead.

A simple, efficient arrangement, Anstar thought. A small ship which could drift down silently after dark; a hiding place in a spot as lonely as any place on earth, yet within a few hours of one of Earth's biggest cities. But of course the Troll-Angar had a lot of experience in taking over alien planets. He wondered how long it would be in this case; their exploration groups worked well ahead of the main expansion so the invasion might be ten years yet. Then, supplied

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with exact and detailed information about Earth's governments, industries and social life, they would move in and take over competently and smoothly.

He completed his examination of the ship, closed its port, swung back the huge slab of rock which formed the hangar door and returned to his hotel.

Three days later a telegram from Hennesay told him the two men were on their way north.

Anstar paid his bill at the hotel and explained that he would walk out of the village a little way and pick up the country bus. When he was out of sight of the village he put some stones into his suitcase and threw it into a pond. Then he went up into the hills to the hangar cave, entered it, closed the door carefully and climbed into the ship. He made himself as comfortable as he could in one of the storage compartments and went to sleep.

He wakened to the sound of footfalls and the murmur of voices. After a moment he heard the gentle hum of the motors, then felt the ship lift slightly. He was able to deduce what followed. One of the men must have swung open the hangar door while the other brought the ship out, riding about a foot above the ground on its antigravs. Then a pause while the hangar door was closed.

No sooner had the ship's lock slammed shut than he felt the ship rise. It lifted very gently because there must be no scream of displaced air to attract the attention of the local people, so Anstar was able to get to his feet. Silently and carefully he opened the compartment door.

The two Troll-Angar were sitting relaxed in the control chairs. The ship was at about two thousand feet and he could see the lights of some village below. One of the men was making a laughing remark about having a couple of days' holiday and something about some girl on the big ship.

"Greetings . . ." Anstar said, standing just behind them. "I'm sure you must have made a study of native weapons. You will recognise this—it is a revolver . . . If you attempt to rise or to turn round or to manipulate the controls, or to use the communication set, I'll shoot you through the head without further warning."

The two sat absolutely still and silent for fully a minute.

"Who are you?" one of them asked. "You're not a native?"

But Anstar saw no reason why he should answer that question.

"You're not a native," the man repeated. "We're the Troll-Angar as you probably know, and we're taking over this planet shortly. If you're some spaceman stranded on this ball of mud it's to your advan-

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tage to throw in your lot with us. If you've lived here some time you could be very useful to us."

"Bring the ship above atmosphere and make course westward," Anstar ordered the pilot. "Remain where you are, don't talk either to me or to each other, and make no abrupt changes of course. When we're over America I shall be ready to discuss matters with you."

Anstar settled himself in a seat behind the two Troll-Angar, the revolver still ready in his hand.

The ship was an antigrav vessel, and therefore capable in theory of very high speeds even in planetary conditions, but as it had to climb through atmosphere at moderate speed and then descend in a long slant, the trip across the mid-Atlantic took three hours.

During this time Anstar knew himself to be in the most extreme danger. Discipline among the Troll-Angar was rigid and brutal. Even if these two men returned safely to their base ship they would be considered guilty of the most gross negligence in letting him take over the ship in this way. Their only chance of avoiding the most savage punishment was to turn the tables on him and kill him immediately.

But Anstar was a very patient, watchful person. Besides, the two Troll-Angar were fastened into their seats with safety clips and could not therefore make any sudden attack on him.

Approaching the American coast Anstar made them put the ship into a long downward slant, and level off at twenty thousand feet.

"These people have radar devices," one of the men told Anstar. "Coming in at this level we'll be spotted and investigated for sure."

"Do as you're told," Anstar ordered.

They swept over the coast at this low altitude and headed inland.

"Their whole defence system will be alerted," the Troll-Angar insisted. "We'll have their interceptors on our tail."

"We'll make just one more flying-saucer story," the other scoffed. "A three-day sensation in the papers, another report, in a top-secret file, then it'll be forgotten."

But Anstar refused to be tempted into discussion.

"Follow the coast southwards," he ordered. "There's a military airfield about a hundred miles south lying at the mouth of one of the large rivers. Take me there."

The ship changed course.

"Fighters coming up . . . What shall I do now?" the pilot asked.

"Maintain course and speed and don't talk," Anstar snapped. "You know quite well they can't touch us."

Anstar was still very much aware of his danger, but he spared just one glance through the side view-port. A number of American air-

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craft—fast machines with triangular wings—were coming up on a converging course.

"Airfield just ahead," the pilot reported.

"Very well," Anstar told him. "Put the ship down in the middle of the field, as far from buildings as possible."

"Sure you want this?" one of them asked. "These natives will tear us to shreds if they find out who we are. They're nothing but savages."

"They don't appear to me to have the accomplished, refined, studied savagery of the Troll-Angar," Anstar snapped. "Put the ship down."

The man proceeded to do so.

"So you're not Troll-Angar then?" he asked. "One of the subjugated races, I suppose. I wonder what your game is? Whatever it is, we'll get you in the end, of course . . ."

The ship grounded gently as he spoke. Anstar risked a glance outside. The ship was at rest in the midst of an immense expanse of grass sectioned by concrete runways.

"Can you both speak English well?" Anstar asked.

"I do the talking mostly," one of them said. "Falk here knows just enough native lingo to get around."

"I see," Anstar said. Immediately he reversed the revolver and hit the man who spoke English on the head with the butt. The Troll-Angar had hard skulls, so he delivered the blow with all his strength. The man collapsed.

"Your people do this sort of thing scientifically with hyperdermic needles," Anstar commented, "but my way is just as effective."

"You may have killed him," the man called Falk protested.

"Possibly," Anstar replied indifferently. "So you speak very little English? Well, you're going to have a chance to practice. Out," he ordered, gesturing with the revolver.

"Outside?"

"That's what I said."

The man walked ahead of Anstar to the port.

"Open it," Anstar ordered, "and get out."

The man opened the port.

"They'll kill me," he protested.

"Possibly," Anstar nodded, "but I'm going to give you a fighting chance."

He unclipped a weapon from the rack beside the door. Falk's eyes lighted—but Anstar retained it.

"I saw some concrete bunkers by the edge of the airfield. I'll drop this beside them as I pass overhead."

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"Better than nothing," the Troll-Angar exclaimed. "With a gun I can hold them off indefinitely and maybe make terms . . ."

"Very well then . . . Out!" Anstar ordered. "Or shall I shoot you and have done?"

The man jumped to the ground and started off at a brisk lope towards the edge of the airfield. Anstar stood in the entrance-lock and looked around. Along the concrete runway, coming into sight over a rise in the ground, a couple of jeeps appeared. They stopped nearby. Men with guns leapt out.

Anstar closed the lock, pushed the unconscious man out of the pilot's seat and took the controls. He lifted the ship to about a hundred feet and floated across the field. Below him he saw the Troll-Angar running vigorously to cover. Above the bunkers on the edge of the airfield he brought the ship stationary. He picked up the weapon—a good, efficient Troll-Angar electronic gun—and dropped it from the open port. He thought the Troll-Angar might try a shot at the ship, so he lifted it out of range immediately. Then he looked downwards.

The Troll-Angar retrieved the gun, and trotted briskly to the shelter of the bunkers. Three or four jeeps were converging on him and a helicopter was taking off from the far end of the airfield. Other vehicles were moving in the distance.

Of course, Anstar reflected, the natives are not such savages as the Troll-Angar think. A civilised individual—he did not consider the Troll-Angar civilised despite their technical achievements—could probably talk himself out of the sort of spot this man was in. But not this Troll-Angar. He would shoot it out. When his ammunition was exhausted, if he was still alive, when it was too late he might try to explain himself to a group of furious natives, in a language he spoke very imperfectly—and what a fantastic, incredible story it would be!

As Anstar watched, the Troll-Angar's weapon flashed, and one of the natives running across the field dropped. Anstar felt a momentary regret for what he had just done; it was just as if he had let loose a wild animal among them. Some of the natives were going to be killed as a result of his action. But, he reflected grimly, this was a small thing compared to what the Troll-Angar would do to humanity presently if they had their way. Humanity must learn what the Troll-Angar were. Then he dismissed the matter from his mind. Any sympathy he had for the human race was a very mild thing compared with the hate he felt for the Troll-Angar.

Anstar seated himself at the controls, and set the ship in a long slant upwards and eastwards.

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Some of the American aircraft attempted to follow him. He could imagine that urgent signals were speeding ahead of him so that European radar stations would be alerted and ready to pick him up when he came within their range.

It was still night when he got back over Europe. The Troll-Angar beside him muttered and groaned but did not regain consciousness.

Over northern France Anstar put the ship through a number of manoeuvres for the benefit of those who must undoubtedly be tracking him by radar. He lost altitude suddenly, levelled off, changed direction, rose vertically, and finally set the machine in a long slant down to earth.

Down at a hundred feet he skimmed across the moonlit fields until he saw a place suitable for his purpose.

To anyone watching him then, his actions must have seemed completely without reason. He rummaged around in a storage compartment till he found a long piece of fine cord. He attached one end to the horizontal-motion control-lever; the other end he dropped out of the open port. Then he manipulated it very gently till the ship was riding on its anti-grav about ten feet off the ground. Without a backward glance at the unconscious and groaning Troll-Angar—the fellow's skull was almost certainly fractured—Anstar slid out of the port and dropped to the ground.

He felt around in the darkness till he found the dangling cord and pulled on it steadily so as to move the lever hard back. The ship slid away overhead slowly, but with gathering speed. It swooped across the field and hurled itself with a crash against a rocky bluff.

Anstar, who was a careful and patient man with a concern for detail, walked across the field to the wrecked ship, removed the piece of cord, and closed the port. He noted with satisfaction that the ship was not too completely wrecked. The meaning and purpose of its power-unit and equipment could still be discovered.

He walked back across the field on to the road. He kept walking. Within ten minutes two French mobile police went screaming past him on motor bicycles. Then three military lorries rumbled along in the same direction, and just as the sun rose he spotted a helicopter overhead.

Two hours later he was having breakfast in a restaurant. Here he changed some English notes into francs and caught a train for Calais.

He was delayed for a whole day at Calais because he had no passport—indeed this was a detail he had completely overlooked—but he visited the British Consul, explained that his luggage had been stolen, and eventually the matter was put in order.

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On the second day he was back in his home in Shropshire. Altogether he had been absent a week.

During the next few days Anstar bought all the papers he could obtain in several languages and read them with amused satisfaction.

Perhaps there might have been some attempt in America to clamp down on the story. If they had got the ship as well as one of its crew, they might have concealed the whole affair behind the Military Secrets Regulations, but France had the ship, and France did not hold the same views about secrecy. France gave out with the news, so the U.S. thought they might as well follow. The result, as one reporter said, was just about the biggest thing in news till the day of Judgment.

An alien craft—a flying saucer—had come in over the American coast, had landed at an airfield, and had been scared off in such a hurry that it left one of its crew behind. It had swept back across the Atlantic and had reappeared over France. Here (the French news agencies took up the tale at this point) the aircraft was seen to be in difficulties, and had finally crashed within the property of M. Gaston Leroux, cultivateur, of Rheims.

This was not just one more flying-saucer rumour. The alien ship had been photographed in flight by several of the U.S. craft who intercepted it. It had been photographed on the ground as well by an enterprising G.I.

One of the crew, after killing or injuring fifteen persons with a weapon of unknown design, had been rendered unconscious by tear-gas bombs dropped from a helicopter, and was now in custody.

The crashed ship was an equally solid fact. There were photographs of it, surrounded by gendarmes, in the field of M. Gaston Leroux. Another alien, in a semi-conscious condition, had been found inside, and a French camera-man had actually got a picture of him.

It was realised that the really important item in the story was the ship. Unfortunately it had fallen into the hands of the French. The Americans did a lot of fast talking in an attempt to prove that it was really their ship, or at least that they were entitled to examine it. At this stage the British coyly disclosed the news that an alien had been killed in a street accident in London a short while before, and that the presence of others of the same sort was suspected. They were prepared to exchange information about aliens and alien ships.

Anstar was very well satisfied. It was no longer possible that the information about the aliens could be concealed by any military group or by any one nation. He had always feared that in a world so divided as this, one nation might attempt secretly to negotiate with the Troll-Angar—not that such a scheme would benefit them much in the long

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run. But now the whole world knew the facts, and the facts were solid enough to convince everyone. The French had the ship, but they would very soon be obliged to seek American help in unravelling its technical secrets. And the Americans were almost certainly working already on the electron gun used by the Troll-Angar whose name, Anstar remembered, was Falk.

Falk, of course, would be undergoing questioning at the moment.

Anstar felt he could rely on him to be arrogant, haughty and threatening. But something more was required. These humans must be convinced beyond all shadow of doubt that the aliens were ruthless and brutal enemies.

It now seemed as though Anstar's plans would move forward of their own accord. The first sign of this was Hennesay's failure to report for further orders. Anstar telephoned his office but the call was cut off as soon as he gave his name. Without doubt Hennesay had already talked to the authorities. This conclusion was borne out by a report about a police raid on premises in the business sector of London. Although the report of this incident did not link it with the great alien sensation, the premises were those which had been occupied by Falk and his two companions. Anstar reflected that a great deal of information about the aliens' activities would be found there.

The second and more crucial consequence of Hennesay's talking took the form of a visit from a Whitehall gentleman. He wore a black homburg hat and striped trousers, and carried a pigskin brief-case. It was evident from his manner that he was wondering what sort of alien hell-hole he was visiting, and did not feel confident of getting out of it alive. Nevertheless he walked into Anstar's house and into his study without faltering.

"I'm from the Home Office, Mr. Sebastian," the man began. "My name is Potter, Steven Potter. I'd like to ask you a few questions —entirely unofficial questions, I assure you. May I?"

"You may ask your questions, Mr. Potter," Anstar told him in no very encouraging tone of voice.

"Thank you," Mr. Potter began. "A man was killed in a London street some weeks ago . . . You were a witness of this accident, Mr. Sebastian, weren't you?"

"Yes," Anstar said.

"You visited a police station about an hour later, and gave some information to the police about the occurrence?"

"Yes," Anstar said again.

"A private detective called Hennesay says you hired him to watch the occupants of premises just across the street from the spot where this man was killed."

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"That's true also."

Mr. Potter leaned forward and smiled charmingly.

"Mr. Sebastian, the individual killed was not human, and the premises in question have been used as headquarters for a fact-finding or news gathering or espionage organisation run by people who aren't human either. We think you know a great deal about this business and we'd like you to tell us."

Anstar looked at him unblinkingly. "I have nothing to say to you," he stated flatly.

"Then I'll say something more to you, Mr. Sebastian. I mentioned two men who used the premises . . . Recently you went up to Scotland a couple of days before they did, almost as if you meant to intercept them. You have returned, but they have not, and they cannot be traced. This could seem a little sinister, don't you think? And the man who was killed in the street, or rather the alien who was killed in the street —we have begun to wonder if that really was an accident."

Mr. Potter paused. It was clear that he was a very frightened man. He sat in his chair as if wondering at which instant he would be blasted to a pile of white ash by a death ray. Then he added: "We don't think you're a human being either, Mr. Sebastian."

"If I'm not," Anstar said, "who do you think I am, and what do you think I'm doing here?"

"We think you're one of the aliens. As a matter of fact, we think you're an important person among them—a group leader perhaps. We think some of your investigators have been tempted by the flesh-pots of this world of ours. Perhaps they've been drinking too much, or talking too much, or maybe they've taken too great a liking to our young ladies. You've kept check on them for some time, then finally —disposed of them."

The statement of this theory almost stunned Anstar. He hid his amazement and examined it. It was simple and rational and believable—much more acceptable than the truth. He had always realised the impossibility of getting humans to accept his story — a story of space-wars, enslaved planets, of ruthless conquest, of whole races wiped out — of his own flight across space and his arrival on earth many years ago. How much more suitable for human consumption was this brief blunt explanation! And how well it could be made to serve his primary requirement, that humanity must learn to fear and hate the Troll-Angar.

There was a considerable interval of silence while he rapidly adjusted his thoughts to this new situation. The smile on Mr. Potter's face grew more and more strained.

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" Evidently some of my men have talked," Anstar remarked. " Did you torture them ?" As he spoke he had the feeling of taking a first step along a road from which he could never return.

Mr. Potter also had an agile mind; he rapidly assimilated this remark. " We don't torture people," he stated. " However, as you've just admitted, we manage to get a fair idea of what is going on."

" Suppose you're right," Anstar said cautiously. " Suppose you've guessed right . . . What then ?"

" In that case my government suggests that open contact might be made between your people and us. We see no need for spying and underground investigation. Come and visit us openly and exchange information and culture."

Anstar nearly laughed out loud at this piece of simple-mindedness. Exchange culture with the Troll-Angar indeed !

" Bah ! " he scoffed. " We have nothing to exchange with savages like you. The Troll-Angar aren't traders, my poor simpleton. What we want, we take. But no doubt these men you captured have told you already what the fate of your planet is to be. You killed them, I expect, when you got all the information you wanted ?" He asked this carelessly, indifferently. " Not that it matters. The whole set-up on this planet has broken wide open and we'll have to clear out for the time-being. Give you humans time to forget and to start quarelling among yourselves as usual."

" Then you've no inclination to deal officially with my government?" Mr. Potter asked.

" In due course we'll deal with your government," Anstar assured him ominously, " but not just yet. Now run off back where you came from and repeat what I've said. Your fellow diplomats can have a wonderful time discussing and debating and passing resolutions about it."

" Well . . ." said Mr. Potter, hesitating. Then he turned and walked out.

Anstar thought the situation over carefully. Of course there were a number of loose ends. By now Hennesay must have supplied the authorities with the addresses of Troll-Angar agents in various parts of the world. If these were arrested—and provided they were taken alive—their stories might not coincide with this one he had just constructed. However, he thought he could rely on them to be sufficiently arrogant and threatening. His own long residence in this world would be hard to fit into this picture. But there was very little evidence concerning his past life and no-one would be prepared to believe it anyway.

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But now he felt that things were building up to a conclusion. So far as he knew the authorities in Britain had no power to arrest a man simply because he was suspected of being non-human, but it was certain that as soon as Mr. Potter made his report some regulation would be invoked to bring him into detention. In fact, Anstar concluded, it would be surprising if he were not under surveillance at this moment.

Next morning he got his car out and set off northwards towards Manchester. As he reached the top of a rise he stopped the car and looked back at his house. During all his long stay on earth he had been lonely and bored and uncomfortable, but in that house he had enjoyed a good measure of peace and quiet. He knew he would never see it again.

Some miles south of Ringway he stopped at a roadside telephone kiosk, rang up Ringway Airport and had his call switched through to the Sabena Airlines office. Their transatlantic plane was due from Brussels in an hour and a half. He booked a seat on it, giving his bank as reference.

He continued on towards Manchester at a moderate pace. He was certain someone must be following him, though he saw no signs of this. Ten miles south of the city he turned off the main road and proceeded towards the airport by way of a narrow winding lane. He parked his car among many others in the car park and walked calmly to the reception centre. There had been no difficulty about his reservation. He paid his fare in cash, submitted to the process of weighing, customs examination and passport security.

An hour later his plane was heading out over the Irish Channel.

At New York airport he became aware of a man standing among the crowd of people waiting to greet the travellers. He saw the man glance at him sharply. The fellow looked him up and down with a hard, practiced scrutiny, then made a small sign to a companion. The two then began to edge their way out from among the crowd of people. Anstar wondered how it could have been done. Perhaps someone had been flown across in a fast military aircraft to arrive ahead of him. More likely the British had agents in New York.

He went to a bank in New York where he had an account and drew some money; then he booked an air passage south to Puerto Rico. There was a delay of three days before he could make this flight. He saw no sign of any pursuers, but he was still sure they must be around.

In Puerto Rico after a delay of four days he got a plane to Guadeloupe. On the last lap of his journey, however, from Guadeloupe to St. Kitts he had to travel by boat. He was obliged to wait several days before

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the boat sailed, and it called at a number of small islands en route, which gave plenty of time for his pursuers to catch up with him.

When his ship reached St. Kitts there was a big British naval vessel in the bay, and a helicopter up overhead. He reflected that this must have taken a great deal of smart thinking and hard organising. They—the British, that is—must suspect that this was the end of the line.

And it was the end of the line—the end of a long line that had its beginnings many light years away from this insignificant planet.

He spent the night at the local hotel and next morning hired a car to take him to the north side of the island. The driver was a huge, cheerful coloured man, who sang as he drove.

"You been to St. Kitts before, sah?" he asked.

"I have indeed," Anstar told him. "I used to live here. I own a house and a sugar plantation out at the north end."

"You figuring to stay here?" the man asked.

"No," Anstar told him. "I shan't be here long . . ."

He looked down along the road they had come, and saw a car following them, leaving a long trail of red dust. Overhead the helicopter floated.

The manager of the plantation had not seen Anstar for ten years and was considerably flustered when he appeared so unexpectedly. He began to shout orders to his cook to have a meal ready and to talk in an agitated manner about preparing a room for the visitor. But Anstar had no time left to spare for civilities.

"I left a large metal chest in your care, with particular instructions that you should look after it—remember?"

The man did remember, and Anstar was conducted to the storeroom where the case was kept. He opened it—it was no ordinary case and no ordinary lock—and took out two objects wrapped in canvas.

"I'm going to walk up through the plantation towards the hill," he told the manager abruptly.

The man looked bewildered and said something about having lunch and a siesta first. But without further explanation Anstar set off up through the tall sugar canes carrying the two bundles under his arm. He climbed steadily, occasionally glancing up at the helicopter. He passed out of the cultivated area into jungle on the hill slopes above. From the top of a bluff he looked backwards and down at the plantation bungalow in the clearing below. There were five cars standing in front of it now, and a large number of men in what appeared to be naval uniform milling around. He pressed on steadily into the hill.

After an hour of hard and uphill scrambling he came to a narrow valley, almost a cleft, one side of which was sheer cliff. Part way up the valley there had been a very considerable rock-fall from the cliff

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face which had blocked the valley completely. The rock-fall was overgrown with creepers and vegetation. It had clearly not occurred recently.

Anstar unrolled the canvas from his two bundles, displaying two complicated objects made of a silvery glittering metal. One of them rather remotely resembled a gun. The purpose of the other was not evident. He took this second article in both hands, made a few adjustments to the settings on its butt, and pointed it towards the rock fall.

He pressed a button. A thin almost invisible blue flame leapt from the muzzle. The vegetation on the rock fall burst into flame, some of the tumbled rock and clay cracked and split and seemed to dissolve into vapour.

He continued firing steadily, in carefully considered directions. The rock split and dissolved and broken fragments rolled aside; the vegetation blazed up and burnt away; a column of reddish-brown dust rose into the air.

After twenty minutes of this work, a quantity of rock fell away where Anstar had made an undercut, and exposed the shining needle nose of his ship—the ship that had brought him all the long way through space to this unknown planet. He paused for a moment to regard it with affection. It was a familiar thing in this alien place. And this was no ship's tender—it was a genuine space-going craft, a fighting ship crammed with every warlike device his race had developed. To give it to humanity would be equivalent to presenting them with the key to space.

He continued to undercut the material of the rock-fall and as the boulders tumbled down, more and more of the ship was exposed to view.

The helicopter had been out of hearing for some time, but suddenly the roar and beat of its engines sounded quite near as it came over a ridge of the hill.

Anstar looked up. It was flying very low, and as he watched it dropped even lower till it was hanging just above the tree tops. Its cabin door opened and a rope snaked out. Down the rope, one after another, slid five men. They appeared to be marines, and each had a sub-machine gun slung across his back. They vanished from sight among the trees quite close to him. Anstar supposed that others would be climbing the trail on foot.

He fired two bursts, and brought more rock tumbling down. When the noise of its fall died away he was able to hear the movements of the men as they pushed their way through the undergrowth around him.

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"Hullo there, Sebastian," a voice called. It was the metallic amplified voice of a loud-speaker. "Drop that thing you're using and put your hands up. You're completely surrounded . . ."

Anstar dropped the rock cutter, picked up his gun, aimed swiftly and fired in the direction of the voice. There was a crack and a miniature flash of lightning. Movements continued in the undergrowth all around him. He heard voices giving orders, shouts and shufflings. He had a considerable disinclination to kill or injure any of these people, but he was fanatically determined that they should be made to hate and fear the Troll-Angar. He must play his part right to the last. He fired several times at the noises.

He retreated backwards towards the ship. Each time a figure appeared momentarily among the bushes he fired at it. Twice he heard a scream. Three times more he fired at rustling noises among the bushes. But the men were very cautious and skilled. He was aware of them working their way round him and closing in on all sides, but for the most part they kept under cover.

Behind him a voice suddenly called clearly: "Drop that gun, Sebastian."

He swung round and saw a man standing in the open beside the ship. He was a young officer in dark uniform with khaki webbing straps. He had lost his hat and his fair hair was ruffled. He stood with legs wide apart, alert, laughing as if this was some kind of game he was playing. He held a sub-machine gun against his hip in a purposeful manner.

Anstar lifted his gun-muzzle and fired at him. At the very last instant, however, he felt a powerful revulsion against killing this young fellow. He deflected the muzzle of his gun just a trifle as he pressed the trigger.

The man fired a burst from his gun an instant later. Anstar felt as if he had been struck heavily and repeatedly in the chest. He was thrown to the ground, and lay there bleeding profusely.

His pursuers emerged cautiously from the undergrowth, guns ready. They walked around him, and stood looking down at him. One of them kicked his weapon out of reach.

A human would have been dead already, but Anstar was made of tougher substance. He slowly turned his head and looked up at the ship. In giving humanity this he was giving them a pass-key to space. In addition to the ship itself, its motors and equipment, there were navigational manuals, star charts, encyclopaedias of inhabited planets. And he had given them something else—something just as valuable—reason to hate and fear the Troll-Angar. In ten years, when the Troll-

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Angar ships came, humanity could be out in space ready to meet them with well-armed ships of their own.

Anstar's thoughts ran slower and slower as his life's blood ebbed away. He thought he had probably done humanity the greatest service an individual of one race could do for another, and of course they would never know what he had done. On the contrary, they would continue to hate him as a Troll-Angar. This idea amused him.

But humanity would be armed ready and waiting when the Troll-Angar came, and he reflected finally that if there was anything in the universe more courageous, resourceful, aggressive and generally tougher than the Troll-Angar, it was humanity.

This was the last thought that passed through his mind.

Then he died.

Alan Barclay.

THE LITERARY LINE-UP

Unfortunately Lan Wright's serial "Who Speaks of Conquest?" comes to an end next month. From correspondence we have received it is the type of story readers wish would go on indefinitely. The concluding chapters, however, are as tense and exciting as earlier ones.

There will be strong supporting short stories next month, including the debut of Arthur Sellings in our pages—a London author who has made a great name for himself in America. Brian W. Aldiss returns with another off-trail story entitled "Psyclops," a telepathic plot with a very big difference. Plus other stories and features.

Story ratings for No. 45 were :

1.	Hyperant	Francis G. Rayer.
2.	Fair	John Brunner
3.	The Smallest Ally	Kenneth Bulmer
4.	Emergency Call	Alan Guthrie
5.	Place of the Throwing Stick	Frank Bryning
6.	The Unconventional Dustbin	Duncan Lamont

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Automation has not yet followed the conventional design of the human body, but undoubtedly at some time in the future somebody will attempt to build a synthetic human. It will need to be something more than metal, plastics, transistors, and memory banks. It will need to be intelligent.

TO MAKE A MAN

By John Brunner

Illustrated by TAYLOR

Gascoigne sat down amid a crackle of applause. He tried not to let his self-satisfaction show on his face as he gave polite nods in response, but he knew the paper had been a good one. He had made the most of his opportunities, and he had no doubt whatever that the reports of the congress would record his address as one of the highlights.

The chairman—a portly type called Zapocky, obviously in a hurry for his lunch—rose and thanked Gascoigne perfunctorily as soon as the clapping died away. He was on the point of declaring the session adjourned when there was a call from the body of the hall.

"Mr. Chairman!"

Frowning, Gascoigne turned towards the speaker. He saw a tall man with black hair and bony red hands, strikingly youthful compared with most of the delegates—no more than twenty-eight. The days were long gone when the young science of cybernetics had counted

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a preponderance of young experts among its representatives at these annual meetings. Gascoigne glanced at Zapocky, hoping he would call the interruptor to order, but instead he gave a testy and grudging, "Yes?"

"Professor Gascoigne said in the course of his speech that it was impossible to create a cybernetic unit capable of intelligent reasoning in the human sense. Does he imply by that there there is something in the human brain which cannot be weighed and measured?"

"Really, sir!" said the chairman. "Your point would be better put privately." He looked towards Gascoigne, who in turn surveyed

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the front row of the audience, where the big guns sat—Climpson, Bergerac and the others whose opinions virtually ruled the cybernetics field. He felt a slight sinking sensation when he realised they were waiting with interest to hear him answer the point.

He got to his feet with as much good grace as he could muster.

" I don't know who you are, sir," he began.

" Castro—Central University," the young man identified himself, and Gascoigne remembered that he had heard the name. A startlingly brilliant young man, so Climpson had told him after reading Castro's doctorate thesis. One of Climpson's former pupils, too—he would have to tread warily if he wasn't to antagonise the old man.

He put on a polite smile as if he was none the wiser for the information and went on, " I did make a reference to the impossibility of creating true artificial intelligence, yes, but it was not one of the main points of my argument, as you will have seen if you followed me, and has no bearing on its validity."

A mild but pointed reproof, thought Gascoigne, and sat down again.

" You haven't answered my question," said Castro doggedly. "As far as I know, no one has yet produced conclusive evidence as to whether a man is purely a physical being and as such mechanistic, or equipped, so to speak, with a soul. If he's mechanistic, we can duplicate him. If you've proved the impossibility of doing so, you must have also answered that problem."

Gascoigne felt a light sweat breaking out on the backs of his hands. Now he came to think of it, his statement had been the kind of rash generalisation he would have objected to if one of his students had made it. But it was humiliating to be treated as a student himself by a young upstart; there was nothing for it but to stick to his guns.

" Dr. Castro," he said frostily, " there is a world of difference between a robot capable of evaluating a large number of situations and the human being capable of constructing the robot. One is in the province of psychology, the other of cybernetics, and I would remind you that this congress is devoted to the latter. So long as the human does remain capable of constructing the robot, there seems to be no need to duplicate ourselves !"

" There's a world of difference, to borrow your phrase, between necessity and possibility." Castro placed his red hands aggressively on the back of the chair ahead of him, and poked his head forward like an inquisitive monkey.

Gascoigne shrugged. " As I said, it is not material to the course of my argument. I am convinced of the impossibility, but this is not the time to justify that belief."

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"In fact, all it would take to change your mind is for someone to show you an intelligent robot?"

"Naturally," said Gascoigne ill-temperedly. He was glad to see that the tide of opinion, at first mildly tolerant towards Castro, was now—out of a mixture of hunger and irritation—definitely flowing his own way. Even Climpson was giving Castro short and reproving glares.

"So your statement was an expression of bias totally without foundation in fact?" Castro seemed to have a bee in his bonnet about this. The chairman looked shocked and rapped with his gavel.

"Dr. Castro, the importance of this matter doesn't justify such strong language!"

His confidence restored completely, Gascoigne bestowed a pitying smile on the younger man, who stood up to his full height. "That's a matter of opinion," he said sharply. "Some people would call it the most important question in the world! Professor Gascoigne is assuming something impossible because no one has ever seriously attempted it. That's like saying that my leg is unbreakable because I've never broken it!"

Someone at the back of the hall cried, "Shame!" The word was taken up, and in a minute was mingled with other calls: "Sit down! That's enough! Order, order! Answer him!"

But the last were few. When the chairman's gavel had overcome the noise, Gascoigne said solemnly, "I wish you luck with your attempt to prove me wrong, Dr. Castro. I look forward to seeing your reply attend next year's congress with you—in person, not to say in personality!"

A pleased ripple of laughter followed the sally, and Zapocky took hasty advantage of it to adjourn.

Thoughtfully, Castro made his way out of the hall with the other delegates. As he paused in the foyer, a middle-aged woman from Barset Tech tapped him on the arm.

"Good luck, Dr. Castro," she said. "I realise, of course, you were referring to original work—and it'll be sensational when you do publish it! I don't have the foggiest how you're going to manage it, but I wish you well anyhow. Gascoigne's been pushing entirely too hard to get to the top for my liking—he could do with taking down a peg."

In complete astonishment Castro watched her walk away. Before he could call after her, there was a man at his side with an alert expression; a notepad was open in his hand.

"Good afternoon, doctor," said the stranger. "I'm Maze—science correspondent for the *Age*. I fully appreciate that if your work was

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ready for publication, you'd have published it, but since you've referred to it here, perhaps you could give me a few facts for my column?"

"I'm sorry," said Castro with an effort. "I wasn't referring to any original work. I wouldn't know how to go about duplicating human intelligence. I only wanted to show that Professor Gascoigne was making an unwarrantable assertion."

"But you must have reasons for saying so," urged Maze. "I know you by reputation, doctor, and I'm sure you'd never challenge an eminent authority like Gascoigne without being sure of your ground."

"Flattery won't get more out of me than the simple truth," smiled Castro. "I'm sorry to disappoint you."

He walked away, but two more reporters caught up with him before he left the building and had to be given the same explanation, and just as he was descending the steps to the street, Zapocky, the chairman of the congress, called to him.

"I don't know what you were getting at, Castro," he said sternly, "but I ought to tell you that we take a very poor view of needless quibbles during open sessions. That's for the private get-togethers after hours. However, since this is your first congress, I thought I'd just warn you—"

"It's not my first," said Castro patiently. "It's my fifth. I've been coming here since I was an undergraduate with Professor Climpson at Nocking. And it wasn't a needless quibble. Professor Gascoigne—"

"Professor Gascoigne is an established authority, and not an Aunt Sally for your amusement." Zapocky didn't take kindly to being contradicted. "I hope we shall have no further cause to speak of this, Castro, or I shall feel compelled to express my view of your behaviour to the Chancellor of your university."

Blankly, Castro nodded understanding. It was finally being borne home on him that he had quite successfully given everyone—apparently—the impression that he believed he could build an intelligent robot. And he had intended nothing of the sort.

The following morning the telephone rang while he was shaving in his hotel room. Wiping the lather off his hands, he picked up the receiver.

"Castro speaking," he said.

"I hope you're pleased with yourself, Castro," said Gascoigne acidly.

"What do you mean?"

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"You know perfectly well what I mean. Don't try and tell me you haven't seen the papers. I can assure you, you've not heard the last of this!"

There was a click as Gascoigne rang off. Puzzled, Castro stood for a moment with the receiver in his hand, before he remembered Maze's meeting with him the day before. He jogged the cradle switch and called Room Service.

"Get me a copy of the *Age*," he requested. "Room 219. And also—" he frowned, trying to remember who the other reporters were whom he had spoken to "—a *Morning Messenger* and a *Reflector*."

"Right away, sir," said the voice at the other end.

Castro finished shaving while he was waiting, wondering what the papers could have made of his passage at arms with Gascoigne. It turned out to be much worse than he had feared.

The *Age* was—as usual—half-amused and quite uncommitted. It gave a column to the serious business of the congress and scarcely mentioned him. The *Messenger* had made it the lead paragraph, but also used most of its space for straight reporting. It was the *Reflector* which startled him. It had a large black headline on page one:

ARTIFICIAL MEN POSSIBLE, SCIENTIST SAYS—See p. 4.

With a sinking heart he turned to the story inside.

A machine can be made as intelligent as a man!

This was the startling theory put forward by black-haired, good-looking Dr. Archibald Castro, brilliant young scientist from Central University, in a stormy scene at yesterday's meeting of the Cybernetics Congress in Jay Hall.

Dr. Castro accused Professor Gascoigne, internationally-famous authority on robots, of making an untrue statement when the professor declared an intelligent machine impossible, and accepted Prof. Gascoigne's challenge to prove him wrong before the assembled audience . . .

Present were such distinguished experts as Profs. Climpson, Bergerac and Zapocky. I approached them for their opinions of Dr. Castro's amazing theory, and received the following comments . . .

Later, Prof. Gascoigne was 'not available' to callers.

Climpson, Bergerac and Gascoigne sat behind the table; it was spread with copies of the day's papers, each open at the page carrying the story of Castro's 'amazing theory.' They looked like a bench of judges; from Gascoigne's self-satisfied sneer it was obvious that he, at least, felt like a judge as well. They were, in fact, a quorum of the committee of the Cybernetics Association in emergency session.

Climpson, a dour man with pendulous cheeks, was as far over on Castro's side as he dared go without losing the respect of his colleagues;

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he felt that loyalty to a former pupil deserved that much, at least. But it was plain that he was convinced, like the others that they were dealing with a hard case.

"And what have you to say in justification of your action, Dr. Castro?" inquired Bergerac in his silky-soft French accent. Castro, seated on a chair facing the table, lifted one shoulder in an empty shrug.

"I've said it all before," he asserted. "That I only meant to challenge Professor Gascoigne's words on the ground of illogicality."

"You mean you're prepared to undertake to produce an intelligent robot?" Bergerac was heavily humourous; he was far over on Gascoigne's side.

"Of course not."

"Then why did you tell the reporters you could prove me wrong?" said Gascoigne triumphantly.

"I did nothing of the sort!" flared Castro.

"I'm afraid it won't do you any good to deny that, Archie," said Climpson. "I saw you talking to Maze, myself, and Zapocky tells me he saw you speak to at least two more newspapermen as you left the hall."

"I told them exactly what I've told you. If they chose to make sensational copy of it, it wasn't my fault."

"But they had to be given the opportunity!" said Gascoigne. "You saw a chance to get some publicity for yourself and put me in a bad light at the same time—"

"If you can believe that, you've got a persecution complex," said Castro bluntly, losing patience. Climpson sighed and turned his eyes towards the ceiling, as if renouncing all hope of redeeming his former pupil.

"Well, if you've said all you're going to say for yourself," Bergerac broke in, "I'm afraid you leave us only one course open. We cannot tolerate attempts to make cheap personal capital out of the Association; nor can we tolerate people who make such attempts. I shall notify your university of your conduct, of course, but what they do is up to them." He gave a quick glance to his left, and received an immediate nod from Gascoigne; to his right, and a slow, grudging one from Climpson.

"We feel compelled, therefore, to suspend your associate fellowship of this body."

"Permanently?" Castro sounded angry and dismayed.

"Or until you see fit to apologise to Professor Gascoigne and the Association." Climpson threw the hint out optimistically.

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"There's no chance of that," said Castro shortly. "But it's no punishment as far as I'm concerned. I wouldn't care to be connected with this body any longer after your ridiculous and arbitrary behaviour" He got to his feet. "Good-bye, gentlemen. You won't be hearing from me—but I can guarantee you'll be hearing of me."

Wearily, his face set in expression of anxiety which bid fair to become permanent, Castro paid off the taxi which had brought him from the airfield, shouldered the strap of his overnight bag, and walked down the path towards his front door.

Scowling as he fished for the key in his pocket, he remembered that he hadn't warned Molly he was going to be home a day early. Stepping into the hallway, he called her.

"Darling! I'm home!"

There was no reply. He shrugged. Gone shopping, or something, he guessed. Well, it would give him a chance to figure out how to break the bad news. He dumped his bag and went into the lounge to pour himself a drink. Then he sat down on a settee and gazed out at the flowers in the garden blazing under a June sun.

It was all very well to put up a bold front before the committee of the Association; it was another thing to pretend to himself that having principles was not occasionally a fatal disadvantage.

There was no question at all about the university's decision; the cybernetics faculty at Central was far too small and uninfluential to stand the kind of adverse criticism which would result from keeping him on. His name was not yet respected enough to have weight with them.

Which meant he and Molly were going to be out in the cold.

Not that he thought she would care so much; the atmosphere of petty bickering and competition which made up small-town university life was something she hated. But for himself it meant starting over; this post would have been a stepping-stone to a lecturership and almost certainly to a professorship at an unusually early age . . .

The phone rang, breaking his train of thought. He got up to answer it.

"Archie Castro speaking."

"Good!" said the voice of a stranger—a man. "I wasn't sure I'd be lucky enough to catch you in. I tried to contact you at the cybernetics congress, but they told me at your hotel that you'd checked out."

"Who's that speaking?" asked Castro, confused.

"My name's Arbuthnot, Dr. Castro," said the caller. "I'm Vice-President in charge of Research of Acey-Acey." He spoke as if the

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initials were familiar to everyone; they certainly were to Castro. Accounting Computers and Automation Corporation was one of the three biggest firms in the commercial cybernetics field.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Arbuthnot?" he said.

"Well, there's something I'd like to discuss with you in person. I'm here at Waterton at the moment; I can get a 'copter and come right down. Are you going to be there for the time being?"

"For the time being is right," said Castro sourly. Arbuthnot gave a chuckle and cut it short apologetically.

"I'll see you at three o'clock, then—all right? Good. Good-bye."

Castro dropped the receiver, still frowning. Was it possible that Arbuthnot had heard what had happened to him, put two and two together, and decided to offer him a job? It was the only obvious answer; if it was true, it was welcome. He had decided against going into industry when he began his post-graduate work, because he wanted to be able to do research along his own line without danger of being sidetracked into what some board of directors thought financially attractive.

However, he was in no spot to make terms now.

A few minutes before three, he roused himself and saw Molly's car turning into the drive. He went out to the garage to meet her.

"Archie darling!" she exclaimed with astonishment as she got out of the car. "What on earth are you doing back so soon?" She put up her face to be kissed, put her arm around him, and started back into the house with him.

Thoughtfully gazing at the ground, Castro said, "Well, I'm not quite sure how to tell you . . . Did you see this morning's papers?"

"You mean about you and that awful Gascoigne? Yes, I did. I hope you told him off properly."

"No. They told me off. So I've got news for you."

"And I have some for you, too," interrupted Molly with an impish grin. "But that can wait a moment. Go on."

The door chimes sounded, and she glanced round. "Who can that be? Are you expecting anyone?"

Castro checked his watch. "Yes, a man from Acey-Acey. He said he'd be here at three o'clock." He crossed the hall where they were standing and opened the door.

A plump man stood on the doorstep, his face red with sun and beaded with sweat. "Dr. Castro?" he said. "I'm Wilfred Arbuthnot."

"Come on in," said Castro. "This is my wife Molly."

"How do you do?" nodded Arbuthnot.

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"Darling, would you get Mr. Arbuthnot a drink? He could do with it after his trip, I expect. Come into the lounge and sit down."

When she had brought them tall cool glasses, Molly settled into a relaxer and looked at her husband thoughtfully. Arbuthnot, sipping his drink, broke the silence.

"I suppose I'd better get to the point, Dr. Castro. I read about your little dust-up in the papers this morning, and I was naturally very interested—"

Watching, Castro felt his mouth twisting into a sour grin. Morals for the business man: hit him when he's down—he costs less that way. The next remark would be something like 'an opening for a scientist of your calibre.'

It wasn't. Arbuthnot set his glass down and leaned forward. "What it boils down to, Dr. Castro, is this—Acey-Acey wants the intelligent robot."

Molly gave a little giggle and immediately looked ashamed of herself. Castro allowed himself a faint answering smile, thinking of the dozens of times they had discussed this point together.

"Why come to me?" he said flatly. "I haven't got it."

"Of course you haven't. I didn't think you had," said Arbuthnot with disconcerting candour. "We've had twenty experts working on that line for five or six years now and they've got nowhere. What did you *actually* say at the congress, by the way?"

Castro told him, and added, "When I said I could see no reason why one shouldn't build an intelligent robot, I didn't mean I wouldn't be prepared to turn up a reason if I investigated the problem seriously."

Arbuthnot settled back in his armchair. "I can tell you—in confidence—we've licked most of the obvious ones. You know any big firm like mine has research projects which won't deliver a result to the public for as long as ten or twelve years sometimes—matter of turning a lab experiment into something you can leave around for the kids to knock over and it'll still run. We've got to the stage where we can put an information bank as big as the human brain into twelve hundred cubic centimetres; in some ways we've improved on brain tissue. We could build a humanoid to-morrow with better senses than ours, tougher, stronger—but it wouldn't be intelligent."

Castro gave a weary shrug. "I've spent quite a while on the problem myself," he admitted. "For my own amusement—though it wasn't amusing in the end. I wound up with rather less than no progress. There's something wrong with our entire approach."

"Exactly!" nodded Arbuthnot. "We can make a machine to hold more information than a man could get in a lifetime—what good's that? We tried keying in the fact of its own existence as data applicable

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to all equations, but we just couldn't design a circuit that would duplicate consciousness. If I sit down and work an equation, I'm always aware that *I'm* doing it. A machine isn't."

"Because it didn't think out the problem for itself," put in Molly shrewdly.

"Precisely," agreed Arbuthnot. "That's the root of the trouble. In fact, before we make an intelligent robot, we shall have to make a man."

Molly giggled again, and this time didn't look apologetic afterwards. Castro gave her a startled glance. He was having to admit to himself that his judgment of Arbuthnot as an ordinary business man was totally wrong.

"I must admit," said Arbuthnot, "that when I rang you I did have a sneaking hope that you really did have a clue to the intelligent robot. I've been dreaming—quite literally—of having it handed to me on a plate for years."

"What would you do with it when you got it?" asked Molly. It was a question she never tired of asking Castro.

"Use it for all the things men are too fragile for, as a start. It'd be the greatest boon to psychology since Freud, too. And it would be—oh, I don't know. Company, if you like to put it that way."

"Company?"

"We're lonely, we human beings. Look at the mania we have for pets. But what's really lacking between us and animals is communication. A robot with a true mind could fulfil the lack. It would be the same as ourselves—and yet different in ways we can't guess at." Arbuthnot shrugged. "But it's still a dream. I'm sorry to have troubled you, Dr. Castro."

So he hadn't meant to offer me a job after all, thought Castro. Somehow, he felt vaguely disappointed.

"Of course," the plump man added as he took his leave on the doorstep, "if you ever do solve the problem, Acey-Acey will be interested enough to make the effort worth while. Meantime, think of me battering my head against a brick wall sometimes!"

"I like him," said Molly when Arbuthnot was out of earshot. "Oh, but darling! You haven't asked me where I went while I was out!"

"Where did you go?" Castro asked mechanically.

"I went to the clinic for a test, and Dr. Woods says it's definite. It's too early to tell, but he thinks it may be a boy." She was flushed with excitement. "Archie, you don't look very pleased about it."

"I'm not, really," said Castro with naked honesty. "Because I haven't told you what's happened to me yet."

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Molly's face went as still as stone. "I can guess," she said. "And I suppose it was Gascoigne's doing."

Lying awake and wishing he was asleep was something Castro hated. Tonight he was suffering it in full measure.

He turned over and glanced at the bedside clock. It showed half past three, and he hadn't slept at all. He had been worrying.

At first he had thought of fighting back, but as the hours slipped away he had grown sure it was hopeless with all the powers that were ranged against him. He had already sent denials to the papers involved, but the news of his suspension by the Cybernetics Association would appear at the same time, and no one would take any notice.

And they would cancel his grants and withdraw him from his post here, and he would be left with a wife, and a child on the way. To his tortured brain, the expense of starting a family suddenly seemed mountainous: food, clothing, education, perhaps hospital fees . . .

Odd character, Arbuthnot. Seemed really sincerely to want the intelligent robot; to think it important. A better man to work under than most of the people in business who employed scientists. Wouldn't mind working under him, really. But of course he'd been quite honest: he wouldn't want Castro unless he knew it meant getting the intelligent robot as well.

Have to get a job in industry. Dead end: designing new car assembly lines, or something. Come out after thirty years with a pension and the honour of having added half a dozen patents to the pile controlled by the company. What a future! Of course, it wouldn't be so bad if you were sure of making some real contribution to science—like the intelligent robot. Working under Arbuthnot . . . have to pay for food an' clothes an' education—Education!

The phone shrilled and shrilled. A hairy, plump arm crept out of the bed and lifted the receiver on to the pillow. "Yes?" croaked a sleepy voice.

"That you, Arbuthnot? Castro here. I want a job with Acey-Acey."

Arbuthnot sat up in bed and gave a cavernous yawn. "At four-fifteen in the morning you ask for a job? Castro, you must be crazy!"

"I'm not," said Castro, and gave a delighted chuckle. "I've just had the most brilliant idea of my life. I think I can build the intelligent robot. Given your facilities."

Arbuthnot breathed a silent prayer. Castro went on, "I only thought of the answer a few minutes ago, and I haven't worked it out yet, but

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I'm coming round to Acey-Acey in the morning and if you don't hand me your lab I'll—well, I'll be very surprised." He chuckled again. "Goodbye."

Maniac, ringing up at this time of the morning, thought Arbuthnot as he replaced the phone. He lay down again. Another thought crossed his mind: ought to check with my psychiatrist—these wish-fulfilment dreams are getting too frequent for comfort . . .

"Gascoigne!"

Turning at the sound of his name, Gascoigne saw a face that seemed familiar approaching him across the floor of the restaurant. He frowned with the effort of recollection, and then added three years to his memory of Castro, identifying the other. He nodded frostily and turned back to his meal.

Though the room was far from crowded, Castro took a chair at the same table as Gascoigne and sat back with a pleased expression.

"Really, Castro!" said Gascoigne sharply. "I'd hardly have thought you so anxious for my company after our last meeting. I have certainly no desire for yours."

Then he slowly began to take in the aura of prosperity which radiated from Castro like a beacon; he listened as the younger man selected expensive items from the bill of fare, and grudgingly admitted that Castro had been right to declare suspension from the Association to be no punishment. He felt a twinge of envy.

"You'll be interested in what I have to tell you," Castro asserted. "I assure you of that."

"Very well," sighed Gascoigne heavily. "I suppose at this distance there's no point in raking up an old quarrel. You're in industry now, aren't you? Or something?" he added with the fine contempt of the pure for the applied scientist.

"That's right," nodded Castro. "Acey-Acey. Soon to be the leading firm in the field—by miles. And I'm afraid I did intend to rake up our old quarrel. I came, in fact, to tell you that it's not impossible to build an intelligent robot. We're building them."

Gascoigne dropped his spoon into his soup with a clatter. Castro ignored his amazement. "It's not being released to the public for another month or so, but we're all ready. However, I'm afraid the papers are bound to dig up their old story about us when the news breaks, so I thought I'd give you a chance to prepare yourself."

Gascoigne stared hard at him. "Really, Castro! Don't you think the joke has gone far enough?"

"So I'm joking." Castro shrugged, and went on round a piece of smoked salmon. "If you haven't got an answer ready, you know

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you'll be washed up, don't you ? I intended to invite you to Acey-Acey to see for yourself, but if you don't want to go, it's your funeral."

Gascoigne felt himself weakening under the casual eyes of the other. He said, " Well , . . Would it take long ?"

" Half an hour to reach the place by 'copter. But once you're there, ten minutes should be enough to convince you."

The helicopter settled to the surface of the park beside the factory. Gascoigne looked about him nervously at the long low buildings of the assembly line which made up the bulk of the firm's premises.

" Not that way," said Castro. " Over here. Don't get out for a moment."

Gascoigne stiffened. Approaching them across the concrete was a humanoid robot about four feet tall, its metal shell gleaming in the sunlight. Its articulation was as smooth as an athlete's, and it carried its head cocked on one side in an almost diffident posture.

" Come on, Matthew !" said Castro. " He won't bite. This is Professor Gascoigne come to see you."

The robot rounded the nose of the 'copter and opened the door for Gascoigne to get out. A little nervously, he did so; Castro beamed down with an almost fatherly expression.

" How do you do, Professor Gascoigne ?" said the robot in a pleasant tenor voice. It had marked overtones of shyness. A cleverly jointed metal hand stretched out to him.

" Very clever !" said Gascoigne grimly. He turned to Castro as the other also left the 'copter. " A nice piece of programming !"

" You're rude !" said the robot in a tone of annoyance. " Dr. Castro has taught me always to be polite and shake hands with people. Don't you know about shaking hands ?"

" Run along now, Matthew," said Castro, hiding a smile at Gascoigne's dismay. " The professor is a very busy man—sometimes busy people forget about good manners."

" All right," said Matthew docilely. It turned and walked away, casting glances over its shoulder with an air of human puzzlement.

" Matthew was the first of our experimental models to succeed," said Castro. " But he isn't as advanced as Mark—hasn't got quite the cranial capacity. Mark is really quite spectacular. This way." He turned towards the factory.

They passed through the door into the experimental wing—monitored, like all the doors outside Acey-Acey, by one of the firm's own security devices: a visual-vocal-tactile checking unit—receiving a cheerful, " Good afternoon !" from the courtesy bank, and entered a

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long, airy passage. Sounds of equipment in operation came from behind the doors which lined it.

"New ideas keep turning up so fast just now, we seldom stop testing them," Castro remarked as he led Gascoigne towards a door labelled CLASSROOM and ushered him through.

"I'd like you to meet Wilfred Arbuthnot," he said. The plump man standing before the small table in the middle of the room turned and offered his hand. But Gascoigne wasn't listening. He was looking at the seated robot.

This one stood the height of a man; it was painted an iridescent blue and had mobile features which were at present creased into an elaborate frown as it bent its head over a fat physics textbook. After a moment it glanced up; it recovered itself and stood up, revealing itself to be a head taller than Gascoigne.

"This is Mark," said Castro. "Mark, this is Professor Gascoigne. He doesn't believe in you."

The robot smiled and revealed that it had teeth; it was eerie not to see a tongue move behind them when it spoke. "Glad to meet you anyway, sir," it said. "Dr. Castro told me a lot of people might find me hard to accept."

This time Gascoigne was so shaken he numbly took the hand it offered.

"Mark is fourteen months old," said Castro. "He's pretty advanced for his age, as you can see. Of course, that's due to the fact that we understand his psychology perfectly—after all, we designed it. Sit down, Mark," he added. "I'd like you to tell the professor what you've been doing today."

"Just lessons, same as usual. I had English Literature this morning, and we studied some poetry, and an hour of math. And now I'm doing some physics problems. They're pretty hard going," it added with a reproachful look at Arbuthnot.

"By the way, Dr. Castro, I wanted to ask you something. I was listening to the radio last night and I made up my mind I'd like to learn the piano. Could I?"

"You'd probably make a very good pianist," said Castro. "You're a quick learner. When did you discover you liked music?"

"Oh, I don't like all of it. I've just been listening to it, I guess. But I want to make up some myself."

Arbuthnot broke in. "We ought to be getting on with the lesson, Archie. Was there anything special you wanted?"

"Yes. I wanted to convince Professor Gascoigne we have actually got an intelligent robot."

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Mark looked hurt. "You mean he still doesn't believe?" it said. "What does he think—that there's someone inside me? You can take a look if you don't think I'm real." It started to undo the wing-nuts holding an inspection plate on its chest.

"Well, surely it isn't beyond Professor Gascoigne's ability to think of a quick test which will settle things beyond doubt," said Arbuthnot sweetly.

Gascoigne was looking completely bewildered. After a long pause he said, "You *could* have programmed a unit to cope with this sort of thing—" He sounded doubtful himself.

"Mark has programmed himself exactly as a human being does," said Castro firmly. Gascoigne squared his shoulders with a martyred air, and addressed Mark.

"You said you liked poetry," he suggested, feeling extremely foolish.

"Some." The robot was quite candid. "I think some of it's lousy, but Dr. Castro says that's mostly because I can't understand it yet."

"What about this?" said Gascoigne, and determinedly began to recite 'The Walrus and the Carpenter.'

Arbuthnot raised an inquiring eyebrow in the direction of Castro, but the other was gazing with astonishment at Gascoigne and murmuring, "Brilliant! Oh, brilliant! I'd never have thought of that!"

"*But that was scarcely odd, because*
They'd eaten every one."

And Mark giggled.

Gascoigne threw up his hands and turned to Castro. "You win," he said dully. "I've believed a lot of things—but I can't believe you could programme a robot to have a sense of humour unless it was intelligent. *How did you do it?*"

"We'll leave Mark to get on with his studies," Castro told him, "and I'll explain outside. So long, Mark—work hard."

"You bet!" said Mark. "Did you tell the professor I want to be a cyberneticist when I grow up?"

The door closed on Gascoigne's final surrender.

"Of course there were a lot of factors involved," said Castro didactically as they walked slowly down the passage. "It couldn't have been done without some of Acey-Acey's technical achievements, like the kinaesthetic tell-tales which supply the equivalent of cell-data to the robot cortex—or the cortex itself, come to that.

"But what it boiled down to in the end was this: intelligence isn't something you can *put* into a machine—you have to let it happen.

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Intelligence isn't present in a human baby, you know—only the capacity for being so later. And that we could build, and did. We included two basic drives—self-preservation, and hunger, which is governed by the accumulators powering the robots, and the need to re-charge them. Oh, yes—and we added a slight bias in favour of human company. We weren't taking any chances !

" Then we equipped the cortex with sensory receptors and a vocolator and manipulating tools—and turned it on. We didn't even build in self-awareness. That doesn't exist in a new born baby, either. Naturally, we had troubles—you should have seen some of our haywire mockups before we ironed them down to printed circuits and transistors !"

" What gave you the key ?" demanded Gascoigne.

" I became a father," said Castro, " and started wondering about child education. And of course, I saw that all I had to do was—this."

He flung open a door lettered KINDERGARTEN with the air of an impresario bringing on his latest discovery, and Gascoigne looked into the room.

" This is Luke," said Castro proudly, but Gascoigne scarcely heard him.

The room was padded with heavy foamed plastic; it had a window of unbreakable glass. In the centre of its floor sat a robot—this one was over seven feet tall. Scattered about it were twenty brightly coloured building blocks and an assortment of picture books. With great concentration the machine was trying to balance one of the bricks on one corner; every time it failed, it tried again.

After a few moments it noticed them, tossed the brick aside excitedly, and tried to stand up. At the first attempt it toppled over with an earth-shaking crash.

" Luke is only about six weeks old," said Castro apologetically.

The second time, teetering dangerously, the robot managed to get its feet under its centre of gravity, and came with slow determination towards them.

" Da-da !" said Luke. " Da-da !"

John Brunner

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As 1957—the beginning of the International Geophysical Year—approaches, interest is beginning to quicken in the thought of the artificial satellites which will be put in orbit about our planet. In this up-to-the-minute article Kenneth Johns shows that it is not going to be a simple matter placing the satellites in their correct positions. But it will be done.

PROJECT VANGUARD

By Kenneth Johns

A few months after July 1st, 1957 Man will send his first robot satellite into space. This will be his first foothold on the broad highway between the planets—a step onto the road of space.

No longer just a wild dream, the satellite project is an official undertaking of the United States Navy. The powers-that-be think of this merely as a means of gathering data. But it is more than that. It is the means by which Mankind will one day escape the backwardness of his own planet.

Earth is the *all* to humans; but, in reality, it is merely a cosmic speck of dust revolving around a grain of hot gas, the Sun, lost amidst the barbaric young suns near the rim of the Galaxy.

The satellite project has been given the official title of PROJECT VANGUARD. A fitting name.

The fronters of space have already been conquered by the minds of children and a few adults. We are now ready to turn the fiction nto fact; the scientists with their slide rules and computers are building t he road that has already been mapped. They will be followed by the untold millions of the future.

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The *conquest* of space itself will never be achieved—the immensity of space dwarfs even the human imagination. But this century will see the greatest achievement of Man—the conversion of a vast conglomeration of ideas, facts and material into the tools for the *exploration* of space.

The Glenn L. Martin Company, builders of the Viking rocket, has been given the contract for the construction of the three-stage rockets that will launch the satellites into their orbits round the Earth.

The General Electric Company has the contract for the rocket booster to be used in the first stage. The prototype of this has already been successfully tested in the U.S. Hermes rocket. Firing for two minutes it will use a 27,000 lb. thrust to accelerate the other sections to 3,000 - 4,000 m.p.h.

John P. Hagen is the director of the project and Rear Admiral F. R. Furth is the general supervisor.

It must be faced that the present rocket motors are incapable of carrying a man into space. Even after ten years' work, beginning with the V.2., we can only put a payload of 21½ pounds of instruments into an orbit just above the greater part of the atmosphere, but still within our atmospheric sheath. And every mile above 300 miles—the target height—cuts down the useful payload.

In one way, paradoxically, satellites at a height of 300 miles are a deep disappointment. Although an elliptical orbit will take some to a maximum height of 800 miles it is the best that astronautics can now hope for, and, judged by the amount of work and time involved, it appears unlikely that these performances will be markedly improved for some years to come.

The Americans plan to put up at least ten satellites, whilst the Russians and French have stated that they will make similar efforts. So far only the Americans have given detailed data on their project.

As far back as 1948, the United States Government stated that they were actively studying the possibility of launching an artificial satellite —then known as an Earth Satellite Vehicle. This was only three years after the capture of Peenemunde and assorted German V.2 specialists including Dr. Wernher von Braun. The American rocket workers realised the immensity of the problems involved in a satellite project and went ahead with the development of rocket motors and instrument-carrying rockets. But, they had always in mind a satellite project.

One of their earliest instrument-rockets, the WAC Corporal, reached a height of 43½ miles with a payload of instruments, assisted by a booster stage. Then, in 1948, an Aerobee rocket carried instruments

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to 70 miles also with the aid of a booster. Then, most publicised in this upward progress, a two stage rocket—the lower step a captured V.2 carrying a WAC Corporal—penetrated to 250 miles. It is worthwhile remembering in this connection that the best that can be expected from balloons is about 25 miles, and then only under exceptionally favourable conditions. According to test reports, piloted rocket aircraft have reached a height of nineteen miles.

From 1949 onwards the pace quickened. The Glenn L. Martin Company began to build the Viking rocket, the most powerful and versatile of the U.S. instrument-carrying rockets. The Viking was designed to carry a maximum 2,000 pound payload and to operate without a booster; but in practice, only small loads can be carried to great heights. Firing was similar to that of the V.2, straight up from the rest position on their fins. Most Vikings were fired from White Sands, New Mexico. Eleven of these were fired up to 1954. The eleventh reached a height of 158 miles and brought back some remarkable infrared photographs of the Earth's surface from that height.

The Viking rockets were built as a series. Modifications were made to each successive vehicle so that performance continuously improved. It is this accumulated know-how that is being brought to bear on the construction of the satellite rocket sections. Also a great deal of information invaluable to the satellite programme was brought back on the Earth's atmosphere and the Sun's radiations. Each rocket was destroyed when it fell, but its recorded information was either telemetered direct to the launching site or—as in the instance of photographs—wound into armoured cases exploded free of the main rocket assembly. It was quite an assignment scouring the desert picking up bits and pieces of smashed up rocket and contents.

The useful part of a rocket's flight into space lasts only for about six minutes. Then it is back inside the Earth's atmosphere. It costs about £100,000 to build and fire a Viking with 120 pounds of equipment to somewhere around 150 miles high. This works out at £140 per pound of equipment per minute.

One of the most vocal protagonists of an artificial satellite was Dr. Singer. He worked on the American tests with V.2 and Aerobee rockets and for years continued to publicise the idea of a permanent man-made instrument satellite. His plan called for a cylindrical or globular satellite a foot in diameter. This was known as MOUSE—Minimum Orbital Unmanned Satellite, Earth.

The design of MOUSE is very similar to that of the satellite of Project Vanguard. It was designed to carry a payload of 50 pounds of instruments that would telemeter information back to Earth. In

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a circular orbit 200 miles high it was intended to carry solar ultraviolet and X-ray detectors, counters for electrons and heavier particles from the Sun, a photo-electric measurer of the reflection of light from the Earth, counters for cosmic rays, an information storage unit, batteries, a radar beacon and an ultra short wave telemetering radio transmitter. A solar battery to convert sunlight into usable electricity for powering this mass of equipment to prolong the life of the regular batteries was suggested. The solar battery would be built in as a part of the satellite's skin.

So much for MOUSE, the forerunner of the present Project Vanguard. But other people had ideas for putting up man-made satellites, not only to provide a mass of direct, telemetered information, but to be used as brilliant sky markers, visible over every portion of their path above the Earth.

One idea, with the similar self-effacing name of MINI, was to put a deflated plastic balloon in an aluminium envelope and orbit it at 200 miles. A timer would inflate the balloon with carbon dioxide to a diameter of fifteen feet. Reflected sunlight would make it almost as bright as Polaris, the North Star. The main use of MINI, besides the psychological value of acting as a beacon to inspire men's minds upwards to the stars, was to have been for mapping and gravity measurements. No instruments would have been carried.

More recently the Russians have stated that they will put a small sphere of metal the size of a tennis ball into a satellite orbit before the end of 1956. Their idea is to fire this like a shot from a gun from a single stage rocket. The main problem here would arise in the launching moment, as a rocket in space tumbles, and the attitude adopted varies very considerably. Some form of star beacon might be contemplated, where a telescope relays the star patterns it sees until they exactly match the master board, closing the relay and firing the shot.

As a contrast with the previous ideas, the satellites of Project Vanguard will be spheres twenty inches in diameter. Different designs will be used for specialised satellites for particular jobs; but the total weight of each will remain at about 21½ pounds.

The useful payload will be say 20 pounds, about half consisting of batteries and silicon photocells (such as a solar battery) to produce and store electrical energy for the operation of the equipment. A radio-controlled switch will probably be built in to switch off the equipment. The idea is to conserve the available energy, the one factor extending the *functioning* life of the satellite. The information obtained could be recorded on a tape or magnetic drum and broadcast in short, speeded-up bursts at pre-determined times.

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200 watt-hours of energy will be about the limit of the batteries. This will have to run the Geiger counters, measuring instruments, amplifiers and radio. It will probably be enough for them to operate for twenty hours continuously or longer intermittently.

The total cost of Project Vanguard will be £3,500,000. This means that information will be gathered very cheaply. Even if only one satellite is launched and orbited successfully, the cost works out at £125 per pound of equipment per minute of operation. This compares favourably with the Viking figure of £140. And, even more promising, the relative cost will be even lower when several satellites are operated.

All the instruments and equipment carried by the satellites will be ultra-light weight, specially designed and built for the job. They will translate and present all their information in electrical form because it will have to be radioed back.

In addition to carrying the instruments suggested for MOUSE, the first satellite will be hermetically sealed under pressure. Any puncture by a small meteor will result in a shock wave and quick drop in pressure that will be measured, giving some idea of the size of the puncture.

Micrometeorites will bombard the skin and impact detectors will count them and measure their size and speed.

There is no hope of salvaging the satellites once they fall from orbit. They will be converted into gleaming dust and vapour as they skim lower and lower through the atmosphere. This cuts out any hope of using telescope and camera to photograph directly the Sun and stars. And, on a budget of 21½ pounds payload, the chances are nil that television cameras will be sent up. So far, the lightest TV camera unit weighs 55 pounds.

Some of the American satellites may be circumpolar, their orbits arching over both North and South Poles. This has the benefit that the satellite can be launched from anywhere on the Earth's surface and the resulting orbit covers the widest range of magnetic and geophysical changes.

Circumpolar orbits, however, have very definite drawbacks. More energy is needed to put the satellite into its orbit because the speed of the Earth's rotation cannot be added to the horizontal component of the rocket's velocity. This rotational velocity is equivalent to 1,000 miles an hour, a useful free push which rocket engineers do not lightly ignore. Circumpolar orbits also do not cover the same tracks—the Earth is spinning, so the path of the satellite appears as a spiral. This means that a single chain of stations is insufficient to observe the satellite. In time the satellite would travel over every part of the globe.

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The simplest orbit is the equatorial; it passes over the same places repeatedly so that a single ring of stations would be able to observe it; it has that free thousand mile an hour send-off; but, by definition, it gives very little information on other areas of the Earth. An interesting and useful variation will be to launch the satellite at a slight angle to the Equator. Its orbit then appears to wiggle from side to side over the equator, changing its position every time it revolves and giving more coverage with the same number of stations.

The first satellite will be fired from the large missile testing ground at Cape Canaveral in Florida. Heading south east over the Bahamas, the second stage rockets will take over at a height of 40 miles, reaching a speed of 11,000 m.p.h., when it has reached an altitude of 130 miles.

After coasting to 300 miles, the final rockets will raise it to its orbiting speed of 18,000 m.p.h. in an accurately fixed path. This will be around the Equator but so off a true circle that it will wiggle 40 degrees north and south of the Equator. It will reach as far north as Gibraltar and as far South as Cape Town and Australia.

And it will be given an elliptical orbit so, at its maximum from Earth, it will climb to 800 miles before swinging back to a mere 200 miles above the Earth.

The firing of the rocket stages will be complex. Contrary to popular illustrations, it will be useless to fire it straight up. It would simply fall back again. And, it is useless to fire it at an angle—like other popular illustrations—it would follow an ellipse and come back to hit the far side of the Earth.

For the satellite to be nudged into its exact orbit it must rise vertically to punch through the densest part of the atmosphere as fast as possible. Then it must tilt and its path curve until, at the moment of final thrust, it is travelling exactly in its predestined path horizontal to the Earth. Five miles per second will give a circular orbit. A difference of just over two degrees in the final stage would give the satellite an elliptical orbit that would cut through the atmosphere at a height of 100 miles on the far side of the globe. The frictional drag resulting would limit the life of the satellite to a few hours.

In a circular orbit at a height of 200 miles a satellite will stay up for fifteen days. At 100 miles it probably wouldn't last an hour. At 300 miles its life could be a year whilst at 1000 miles its life would extend for thousands of years.

If the horizontal velocity at a height of 300 miles is much above five miles a second then the orbit will be an ellipse with a nearest approach to Earth of 300 miles. A horizontal velocity of seven miles a second, the escape velocity from Earth, would convert the ellipse

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into a parabola, whilst a velocity greater than seven miles a second would force the satellite to flee Earth completely in a hyperbolic orbit that could reach the other planets.

So our satellite will be five sevenths of the way along the highroad to the stars. At five miles a second it will take the satellite only ninety minutes to girdle the Earth. It will be in an observer's field of vision for five seconds, lit by the radiance of the sun. But even when the Sun is near the horizon and the satellite is just over the opposite horizon giving maximum reflection, it will be difficult to spot. At its nearest approach it will be only a hundredth as bright as the North Star. Coupled with its speed, this will make it difficult to see unless you know exactly *when* and *where* it will appear in the sky. The best way will be to fix a portion of the sky across which the satellite must move in your field of vision and wait for it to rise. Low power binoculars will be a help.

If sodium vapour is used to mark its passage through the atmosphere the results will be spectacular. A golden yellow gleaming band of light across the heavens, very slowly diffusing and blurring will show the world that scientists have put a halo around the Earth.

Once the satellites are in use, scientists will have the greatest field-day of their lives. From the fresh data pouring in, old theories will be knocked down and new ones built almost daily. From the first tiny human artifacts boldly pushing out onto the threshhold of space will come information needed to reinforce that onward drive.

From robot, instrument satellites to manned space stations is an enormous step; but that step was inevitable from the moment a man first tamed fire and set his descendants on the way to a technological civilisation.

Kenneth Johns.

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Man will meet some strange adventures in space but the most mysterious of all will be his contact with alien germs and viruses—antagonists only doctors will be able to effectively combat. Medical science will undoubtedly be of primary importance to the planetary and star-rovers of the future.

PERIOD OF QUARANTINE

By Francis G. Rayer & E. R. James

Illustrated by TAYLOR

The three crewmen remaining on the *Quest* had been without sleep for the past forty hours. First there had been the usual long wait while the spacetug sank towards the planet below; then mounting excitement caused by the landing party's cautious but unusually promising reports.

And then—silence.

Beyond the main observation port blazed Arcturus 707. A star within the Ursa Major Group of type and magnitude strikingly approximate to Sol, it had attracted them almost against their will. Other stars in the Moving Cluster spangled the celestial sphere with reds, blues, golds and white behind them in naked—and uninvestigated glory.

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Peter Coyne's gaze travelled over them, far away to the right, as he strove to locate any movement, but no silvery glint, or red rocket trail told of the return of the tug. There was only the vastness of interstellar space with the main groupings of stars but little changed in spite of the *Quest's* great—although galactically insignificant—distance from home.

Now that the planet below—the most promisingly Earthlike world found in their fifty light years of searching—was eclipsed from view by the slow rotation of the ship's hull, he would have to seek a new place from which to watch; not to watch was unthinkable, even though radar would certainly forestall his vision.

"Think we should take a second boat to search?" a voice asked.

Peter put his back to the port and its view of infinites unknown. "Not yet." A part of him had gone down with the tug but he held himself firmly in check, trying to appear confident as he looked into his subordinate's naturally pale face with its taut expression and strained eyes. "There's been no report of danger."

"Nor anything else!" Ken Rowan stated, lips thinned. "Only—this silence."

Peter studied him with the critical eyes both of second-in-command intent on the morale of a crewmember, and of a doctor in charge who had seen men break with terror. Rowan was young and therefore impatient but had courage.

"Maybe the Captain's got his reasons," he pointed out. "We'll search if they don't report within the hour."

But it did seem a long time since Captain Fryer had released the tug from the *Quest's* lock. There was both thrill and fear in the fact that he and "Jolly" Bill Blundell would be the first men to tread Arcturus III. Gravity tests, surface temperature readings, spectrum analysis of the atmosphere—all that sort of thing could be done from remote safety. But eventually, inevitably, some men had to venture their health and sanity on the virgin soil that might one day support a colony.

He left the port and trod the ship's central ladder up to the astrogation room. The *Quest* was big, but only just large enough to contain the vast quantity of equipment necessary for self-preservation and maintenance. Her crew was small. That was one of the reasons why he had had a place, he thought as he clanged shut the companion door. A man who could telescope positions of doctor and Second-in-Command was well suited to such an appointment. Thus also with the others: the Captain's knowledge of minerals was great; what Jolly Bill Blundell did not know about soils was unimportant, and Ken

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Rowan was both radio mechanic and expert on vegetations and their possible suitability for introduction on Earth. Finally there was Joe Tomas, astrogator, yet fully qualified to operate the ship if something happened to both Captain and 2 i/c.

Tomas looked around sharply as Peter entered the astrogation chamber. Peter's impressions—heightened unnaturally by the tension—were struck by the man's cold, critical eyes in contrast to the boyish face.

Tomas's fair brows, already lifted, rose higher. "No news from the Captain yet, Doc?"

Peter felt the hidden animosity—as always. Tomas considered that he, Peter Coyne, was too young at twenty-eight for the position of 2 i/c., tests the *Quest's* personnel had taken notwithstanding.

"None yet, Joe."

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Tomas put aside references which were the means of finding Arcturus 707 no matter where they moved within the vastness of Space. "Time there was."

Peter looked away from the astrogation nacelle. Arcturus III floated majestically far below, green, brown and grey, with tufts of cloud singularly reminiscent of Earth obscuring areas of her surface.

"Bound to take time to investigate," he pointed out. "They may have forgotten us for a while in their excitement—" That did not sound like Fryer at all, and he ended lamely: "Both of them have to collect samples, check on things we can only guess at from here."

Tomas's vaguely hostile silence closed around them. Peter, gazing down at the planet waiting so invitingly below kept thinking: *Unknown*, never trod by man before.

Sooner or later the second tug would have to go down there, orienting on the Captain's bearings. And yet—no matter how lamely it sounded—it was true that the Captain and Bill might have found it necessary to go off together, checking some of the thousand and one points which would need clarifying before more ships could come confidently from Earth—and not illogical to suppose that some disturbance in the upper atmosphere had blocked radio signals from the tug's small radio to the big set in front of which Ken Rowan kept watch.

Uneasy lies the head that wears the crown of command. When the ship's intercom system buzzed, he snapped up the switch, sensing Joe Tomas's eyes upon him.

"Second-in-Command here."

"Rowan speaking—" Blast the man, thought Peter, who else was there? "There's a ship coming up behind!"

Astonishment washed through Peter. "A ship? You mean the Captain's tug?"

"No, sir. A—ship."

Impossible. Peter bit off the word unsaid. Ken was not given to fancy. Men of that kind do not gain positions on ships like the *Quest.* Yet in this whole vast sector of the Ursa Major there was no scheduled Earth ship. Interstellar vessels were few, their scattering across the Galaxy equal to a pinch of sand thrown across ten thousand stars.

"You'll get a view of her in a minute, sir!"

Rowan's voice held shocked surprise. As Tomas rose involuntarily from his swivel seat, Peter stepped to the astrogation nacelle, staring back into the pin-pricked dark behind the *Quest's* fluted stern.

A vast ship, squat and wide, was drifting upon a course that would bring her level at perhaps five hundred yards distance—and Peter knew immediately that no change in Earth ship schedules had arisen. Rows of close-set ports glowed and their reflected light picked out

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identification markings as strange symbols. No builder on Earth had designed her.

"Where—did that spring from . . . ?" Joe Tomas breathed.

There being no answer to a question like that, Peter let it pass. Wherever it had come from and whatever its intentions were, he had no intention of abandoning his Captain too easily. But his heart thumped as he thumbed the panel communicator.

"Any news from the tug ?"

"No, sir." Somehow Rowan seemed to have regained his clipped efficiency at seeing something solid. "But there's a signal from our neighbour."

"Stars, man ! Put it on."

Distribution switches clicked and an odd, interrupted burbling came from the reproducer. It might be an attempt to contact the *Quest* . . . or it might be a report intended for companions near or far away; but it was certainly unintelligible and no form of communication employed by Earth ships.

The noises ceased and the vast ship slowed as it came level to block the light of a myriad stars.

Rowan said tensely: "Radar shows something coming from the ship."

Peter strained forward. Out of the gigantic shadow drifted a mote silvered by the light of Arcturus 707. Clearly not a missile, because slow-moving, it resolved itself into a flattened spheroid with single row of circumference ports. He swallowed with difficulty—his mouth was so dry: for, as mankind had spread amongst the stars, strange animals and plants, bacteria, viruses, creatures great and small had been found; but never any manifestation of a challenging intelligence —until now.

"Looks like a boarding party," Tomas said unevenly. "What are you going to do about it ?"

"See what they want—what else ?"

"Then you don't think we ought to escape while we are still in one piece ? That ship's *big*."

"There'll be no running," said Peter. "Not while I'm in charge. Not if I can help it." He was well aware how ragged were the nerves of all of them. "Don't forget the Captain." He took a deep breath. "Joe, you go down and take over from Ken. Get the engines warmed up ready for anything—"

"Then you do think we may have to crash clear ?"

"As a last resort—yes." Peter stared coldly at Tomas. "But if you do anything at all without orders I'll have you in irons."

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Turning from Tomas's livid face, he looked up at the intercom speaker. "Ken, break out a gun and come down and stand behind me while I try to parley."

"Yes, sir."

Peter turned with a deliberate movement, descended without haste to the inner lock of the ship's main port. Through the periscope viewer at the side of the door, he saw that the spheroid had come to rest outside. A section had come down, showing a featureless segment within the strange ship, and forming a platform level with the airlock. Three beings, tall as a man, stood waiting.

As Peter operated the lock, he studied them. Tall as a man—and there the similarity ended. Of the six feet of height, over five was body. Below that, three legs barely six inches long waddled forward with a curious rotating movement as the outer door opened. He continued to observe them through the ports in the inner door. The entire visible surface of the creatures was a dull brown, wrinkled, either rubbery skin or some type of suit . . . the latter, he assumed a moment later, unless they could live in vacuo.

With the trio through the outer doorway, he closed it. Half way up the body a dozen limbs twice the diameter of his thumbs and about a hand's breadth long made a fringe, and it occured to him—as his mind tried to analyse the situation—that the creatures were far less fitted for physical violence than himself and his two companions.

The inner door opening to his touch, his gaze rose to their faces, and halted. Four vertical orifices extended where eyes, nose and mouth might have been, opening and closing rhythmically. A strange haze seemed to shimmer around the heads so that, try as he would, he could not decide if he was viewing the creatures themselves, or through some transparent shield or other protective device, or whether the vertical slits were in some type of rubberish headgear, concealing the being within.

The three halted well inside the inner door, still as posts upon their tripod feet.

Peter closed the door behind them.

"You are welcome."

He hoped they might at least signify that the aural vibration of his voice was detected, but they merely stood.

He pointed to himself and made a questioning gesture. No result. He held up one finger, pointed at himself; held up three and pointed at them. Gesticulating at fenceposts would have had just the same effect.

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From the ship outside it was clear the newcomers were technologically advanced, and some inner sixth sense prompted him to feel that the three were looking upon his gesticulations rather as a man might regard the wrigglings of a frog. Between frog and man there could be no real communication, because man was infinitely more intelligent than any amphibian. Similarly, these aloof beings seemed to be awaiting some manifestation which he could not produce.

" How about if they're telepathic—" muttered Rowan into the silence from behind him.

It was . . . more than probable, Peter thought. They were waiting for a demonstration of telepathy from him—the quickest, most sure and most complete means of communication . . . when one could do it ! As well might a man wait for speech from the unsuitable larynx of a frog, he thought.

He pointed to his lips, waggled his tongue, then said " I am a man," with a finger on his chest. No movement. He sent Rowan for materials and wrote the same words in large print. Nothing showed whether the three observed, or attached any significance to his actions, or the symbols.

Without warning they turned around and approached the lock. Quite evidently they wanted to leave. He wondered desperately if he had somehow told them what they had come to discover. He considered keeping them as hostages, but decided such an action would be worse than futile.

If he did nothing to provoke them, at least he could hope that they and their ship would go back from wherever they had come, leaving him to his plain duty of waiting for his fellows and helping them if it were necessary.

His last view of the creatures, as he manipulated the controls, was as of three rubbery posts entering the spheroid which immediately closed itself up and drifted back towards the parent vessel.

" Scare-y things, weren't they ?" Rowan, standing in the corridor into the heart of the ship, managed a grin. " Do you really think they were telepathic ?"

" If so," said Peter bitterly, " then it was a damned poor show we put up. I wonder what they thought of us." He did not add his real thought, which was that would a telepathic race consider non-telepathic man a civilised being ? Telepathy would create new standards.

He led Rowan back to the Control Room, meeting Tomas's critical gaze and only drawing some small comfort from the feeling that if that man could have done better he would have lost no time in saying so. They looked at the motionless alien ship and listened to its burbling

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over the radio, knowing now that she must be communicating with some distant companion, possibly awaiting reinforcements.

"We can't wait any longer," he decided aloud.

Tomas reached out to the controls. "You mean we get out of here?"

"No!" Peter managed to get the word out quietly. He looked from Tomas's face—eager to flee—to Rowan's which was full of indecision. "I'm going down for the Captain, you understand?"

He would do it right. Time did not seem to be of so much importance as Tomas appeared to think. If the alien ship had been going to destroy them it would have wasted no time. He told them he was going to the Captain's cabin to log what had happened.

He was just finishing his hurried report, when the intercom relay awoke.

"Hello *Quest*. Captain Fryer calling—"

What relief! Good for Rowan using initiative in putting the signal straight through.

Then an incoherent mumble following the call sent shivers up his spine. Something was wrong with the Captain—something mental, by the sound of that horrid noise.

Great stars! So that was the explanation of the radio silence. And he was the ship's doctor; no psychiatrist. Physical ills were his forte. On top of everything else, Captain Fryer, the most experienced crew-member, was coming back to them apparently as a liability instead of an asset.

Tomas's voice, off key with alarm, jerked from the intercom. "Hey, doc. Hear that?"

"Yes." Peter strove to hold his voice steady. Tomas could not be blamed now for a tendency to panic—no, not panic. Tomas was perfectly right, according to his own standards, in wanting to get back to Earth.

"For heaven's sake, doc!" urged the astrogator, "come on up here. Can't see the boat yet, but Ken's picked it up on radar and is bringing it in on remote. The Captain's lost control. Is that O.K.?"

"I'm coming . . ."

He tried to compose himself first. Men were comparative strangers in Interstellar Space, and *he* was fresh from completing his time in St. Mary's Hospital, Manchester. If Captain Fryer was ill, it was probably nothing a fledgling doctor could know about.

"Hurry up, doc," begged Tomas from the intercom. "We can see the boat."

"Right!" Flinging off a depressing sense of his own inadequacy, he snatched up the emergency bag and hurried to the companionway.

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Beyond the main port, the planet glowed as a blue-green crescent, thinned by the speed of their orbit. Near the edge of the dark portion of the disc, the rising spaceboat made a silver of flame.

Tomas's cold, critical eyes caught his and Peter shivered. Tomas, for all his boyish face, had an unfeeling, juggernaut core—a man with a rule-book for a heart.

Tomas studied him. "So you're going through with it, in spite of everything. What do you think you can do with that bag?"

Peter did not answer. They were all keyed up by the succession of dilemmas.

From the remote control behind Tomas, Ken turned from the view screen. "Getting a picture of the inside—see!"

They stared in silence at the pictured interior of the spaceboat. Blundell's thick-set body writhed on the floor, kicking as though at an unseen enemy. On the pilot's couch Captain Fryer moved spasmodically. Peter sensed Tomas's shudder.

"Poor devils!" said Ken. He handled the remote controls instinctively as he stared up at the viewscreen.

Blundell rolled over with the alteration of the spaceboat's course, struck the curved wall and seemed to lose consciousness.

Fryer's eyes opened, narrowed. His hands lifted oddly as if the very co-ordination of muscle was an effort. His clumsy fingers touched the radio control.

"Something strange in here! Feel them—"

His fists clenched and sound cut off as his hand fell away from the radio. He twitched and struggled as if in contact with an unseen enemy.

"I'd better get into a suit," said Peter.

Ken nodded. "Another fifteen minutes and I'll have them in orbit around us— Oh hell! I'd forgotten—" He turned. "Look, the big ship's moving off!"

It was going with majestic slowness, Peter saw . . . and he guessed that it was not yet leaving them. Could it be that—

"At least their mass won't stop us getting the boat in orbit around us," said Ken, voicing Peter's own thought.

Tomas cleared his throat.

"We mustn't rush into this," he said harshly. "We've got to consider everything."

"Go on," prompted Peter. "Say what's in your mind so we can get everything straight."

Tomas glared, then shrugged. "Two ill. Three left. We can't bring contamination aboard. They knew what danger they were facing when they went down there. They're older than we are . . . and wouldn't blame us . . . if we . . ."

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"If we what?" asked Peter.

Tomas smiled uneasily. "We're all three of us young. You know the shortage of experienced men. This needs a team of specialists—not three fellows like us with that gigantic ship—" he jerked his thumb in the direction of the alien, "—giving us competition. Earth'll be glad to see us come back so preparations can be made for defence against those monsters. We'll get a bonus just for locating this planet. Everything suggests we ought to go back *now*. No one can blame you if—"

"If you were out there in that boat," said Peter softly, "would you want me to give the order you're hinting at?"

Tomas stared at him for a moment and then turned.

Peter watched him go to the spacesuit lockers. Doctors were not immune from diseases. Either the Captain or himself or Tomas was absolutely essential to do the astrogation to get them back to Earth . . . to get the *ship* back to Earth. And it was certainly important that some of them should get back . . . to tell of the big ship and its unearthly occupants, and to warn of the hidden danger down there on that beautiful planet.

In fact, the very devil of it was that Tomas was right—according to the rules, as well as according to his own moral standard. They had as much duty to humanity as to Bill and the Captain.

"Coming in nicely," Ken said, his back to them. "Get that helmet on, doc. Give those bugs hell for us. I'll soon have the boat in some sort of orbit."

Tomas held the suit open. "You do see what I've been getting at, doc? I know it's not pretty, but we've already hung about a lot longer than anyone would have expected us to." He frowned. "Facts have to be faced."

"You face them, then!" Peter snapped. "As from now, you're in command."

Minutes later he left the airlock and all space was a fathomless gulf as he dived clear of the ship.

A fleck of light grew into the spacetug as he jetted towards it. Clutching the handles beside the airlock, he looked back at the *Quest* and then beyond the earthship at the gigantic alien now with its ports run into a single unbroken line by distance.

He entered the airlock. The unknown waited in front, separated only by a clamped door—or perhaps by the thickness of his suit if the very air carried infection. He had felt like this once before, as he had been waiting to step into an isolation ward on Earth. But now

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there was no knowledge of what to look for, no experienced men in sterile white to call on for assistance.

Pressures equalized and he stepped inside the cabin.

Captain Fryer was twisted on the couch, sweat beaded his face and his eyes were tightly shut as though excluding something Peter could not see. Blood flashed red on his wrists where nails had dug deep.

Peter took the three paces around him to where "Jolly" Bill Blundell writhed in the angle of floor and curved wall. Picking up the thick-set body, Peter strapped him securely to the other couch.

Bill had been his best shipboard friend, but it would not do to consider personal feelings. One needed a clear head for tests, especially when working in a thick suit, and without any pretence at laboratory conditions.

Peter opened his doctor's bag, thanking heaven the catch had been designed for easy release, and for the hours spent in practice using of the kit under all conditions.

He selected a knife and lifted the Captain's arm. Slitting the woven tunic was unexpectedly difficult for the knife seemed to slide over the cloth. Perhaps the material was tougher than average although more likely it was an effect of his fumbling fingers. He secured the Captain's arm beneath a strap, sawed down through the stretched cloth, pulled apart the frayed edges. He would have to practice cutting cloth for future occasions—if there were future occasions for him.

Fitting one head of the diagnoser into the armpit against the Captain's brachial artery, he strapped the arm over it, then went through the same routine for Bill.

Switching on the diagnoser, he studied the readings.

The Captain's skin was hot and feverish. Respiration uneven. Temperature 102—uncomfortably high. Vein firm, pulse kick strong, 120 per minute—fast !

He clicked over to the second head. Skin cold and chilled. Respiration uneven. Temperature 93—dangerously low. Pulse kick strong, but very uneven 60 to 90 per minute. Symptoms of shock. Evidently Bill had a lower resistance, or was in a later stage.

Peter fitted fresh attachments to his gloves and took blood smears. Blood count normal. Into his memory came filed data of each man's bacteriological state. Both unchanged significantly from his last routine examination. Although Bill's population of staphy was again much lowered by the treatment he had been having—

If there was no definite germ or virus, that made his entire collection of antibiotics useless !

He noticed that Bill had gone limp. In alarm he looked at the diagnoser's meters. At once curiosity mingled with the alarm because Bill's condition seemed to have improved . . .

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"Doc!"

Captain Fryer's lips were moving, his eyelids were opening spasmodically, eyes rolling. Words choked from his lips. "I know— You want to help— Careful— Doc! all around me— Don't—— Pressure in my head—" Then only mumbling.

Bill was writhing again, and also mumbling. If there were words in the stream of incoherence from both the stricken men, Peter could not make them out through his own muffling suit.

His skin crept. Both men seemed to fight unseen enemies. So vivid was this impression that he turned uneasily, examining every part of the ten foot diameter cabin. Something in hiding might be manipulating his comrades'—he corrected himself self-consciously—his *patients'* minds.

Their illness certainly seemed to be not of the flesh, and he wondered if—his suit notwithstanding—it was only a question of time before he too succumbed to unseen forces.

Hurrying now, he went over the cabin systematically, section by section. He took a sample of the dust in the air circulation filter. Some bits of hair . . . The Captain was going bald rather quickly and these probably came from him. Otherwise nothing.

Nothing! Could something be eluding him with a cunning—perhaps an intelligence equal to or greater than his own, observing him, awaiting its opportunity?

He took fresh blood samples, erected the analyser and left it working while he stripped the two men . . . to an accompaniment of his own cursing at the hampering suit and the toughness of the cloth. Even to see clearly through the helmet while searching for any small skin puncture was not easy; but at last he was satisfied that there was nothing that might be the bite of an alien insect, the sting of any unfamiliar poisonous plant or the tooth mark of any unearthy animal. Bill's bruises were plainly from being loose during rocket blast; the Captain was as nearly unmarked as any man could be. And the separated substances of the blood sample seemed perfectly normal.

That settled it. With no significant physical change—apart from body secretions naturally accompanying mental disturbance—he had to admit the thing he feared most. The illness was wholly psychiatric.

He took a deep breath. Something had happened to these men. Had they seen something unbearable? Of all the senses normal to humanity, sight is the most vivid. Surely now he had the beginnings of an answer.

A drug to relax tension . . . There was no chemical reason why he should not inject straight away. Something that would numb the

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controlling part of their brains, so that he might receive the answers he needed.

He chose his capsule with care, waited for the injection to take affect on the Captain—who seemed the more likely to be able to make coherent answers—and began directly.

" Captain Fryer ! Can you hear me ?"

The eyes opened, staring blindly. " Yes."

" Captain Fryer, what was the most unusual thing that happened before you left Arcturus III ?"

" Blundell brought in jelly balls . . . Living matter, he said to me, that could separate titanium to form its core."

Peter frowned, out of his depth. Titanium was a metal . . . very chemically active. Why should that excite anyone ? Perhaps the others on the *Quest* could tell him. For the first time he remembered that Tomas and Ken must have been watching him all this time from the screen.

He pressed the send switch of the radio. " Ken, you're the engineer. What's so special about an organism that separates titanium ?"

" Titanium ?" The voice was curious. "—the metal most used in spaceships ? Why, it's hard, stands stress and temperature changes and doesn't corrode once it's crystallised. But it's hell to purify out of ore. If there's something down there on that planet which can do it biologically, it's the answer to a metallurgist's dream."

Peter looked down at the Captain's blank face. " Captain Fryer, what did you do with those jelly balls ?"

" Blundell put them in the hold. He was the expert and he said it was quite safe."

Safe ? On a world that was quite different from Earth, who could say what was safe ? Peter looked down at the hatch cover behind the acceleration couches. Did some dangerous emanation come from this jelly stuff ? Would it affect him as soon as he opened that hatch ?

" The alien ship has got a companion," Ken Rowan's voice said from the radio.

Peter felt shock. The immediate danger to his two crewmates had pressed from his mind the less dramatic, more remote threat of the giant ship and its occupants. "A companion ?"

" Second ship just the same. Sections of each have opened and there's something pointed at us. When you get near a port, take a look—"

" Doc !" That was Tomas interrupting. " If they start anything, we'll have to leave you—you understand that ?"

" Yes." Peter wished that two wholly unrelated dangers to their safety had not risen simultaneously. An unknown disease—and two

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unknown ships. Alone, each was a grave threat. Together they did not bear consideration. It was like trying to fight a monster with two heads. To do that a man must be a veritable Hercules.

The only thing he could do was to face the problem nearest to him, and leave the other to Tomas.

Once more he felt he was moving into the unknown as he forced himself to knock aside the togs and lift the cover over on its hinges. His quickening breath hazed the helmet front but he could just see a mass of jelly globes resting in a transparent container amongst other samples on the bottom of the shallow stowage space above the power pile.

As he knelt, reached down and lifted out the container, he seemed to feel uneasiness come into his mind with a jerkiness not unlike physical contacts with something dangerously hot. Putting down the container on the overturned hatch, still kneeling and bending over it, he kept still. And the weird sensation ceased, leaving him with the impression that it was not the result of any emanation from the jelly, but rather of the overwrought state which had been building up inside him ever since he had entered this little cabin.

Striving to ignore this manifestation of his own nervous tension, he returned to the two men.

"Captain Fryer, what's so special about an organism able to crystalize titanium?"

The Captain's voice put into different words the same meaning conveyed by Ken Rowan from the safety of the *Quest*.

No answer to the illness in that. He bent over the pale face. "What else unusual did you find on the planet?"

"Nothing—unless you count its open invitation for colonisation. I've never seen anywhere so like Earth. Human beings could just walk straight on to it."

Just walk straight on to it, thought Peter, as unsuspectingly as mice walk towards the cheese in a trap.

He studied the contents of the plastic container. The jelly globes were about two inches in diameter. Some of them were immersed in a liquid which was itself in globular suspension because of the no-gravity. All glistened with moisture. Peter noticed that their cores shone silvery—that would be the titanium. Hairs grew on the glistening surfaces of the mass and he noticed some of these move, altering the positions of the globes to which they were attached. So the globes could move . . . and did so by means of these hairs—flaggella. Many tiny Earth creatures did the same.

Hairs . . .

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He recalled the short hairs he had found in the air filters. Yes, they bore comparison with the flaggella of the globes. Perhaps some of the globes had previously been released in the cabin. Dare he risk letting loose some more ? If not, what other experiment could he make? His own uneasiness seemed to be building up. Joe Tomas would desert him like a flash if he endangered his own health—with Ken Rowan an easy prey to all the obviously logical arguments. And then there were the alien ships. More than the lives of Bill and the Captain hung upon the right answer being quickly found to solve this most pressing of their problems.

Peter looked towards the couches. Two men, so helpless, wholly dependent on him. He shook his head. Strange how confused he felt . . . as though many voices were struggling faintly in the back of his mind, too weak for expression—just a background of unease.

With sudden decision, he eased off the top of the container. He had half expected the globes to fly out; felt perverse chagrin that they did not. Water drops, disturbed by the air, floated up. One of them touched the front of his helmet and ran down as he jerked his head in reflex action away from the unknown. A short hair—one of the flaggella—twitched and wriggled where the droplet had been. His eyes ached as he stared at it so close to his face.

He ducked the helmet against another suspended drop of water, moved as before and saw a further two hairs left twitching on the glass. Could these hairs be parasites on the jelly creatures, clinging like leeches ?

He removed one from his helmet with forceps and studied it under a microscope. A single living cell with a nucleus within the elongated protoplasm, it definitely had independent life.

Was this, then, the thing that could affect human beings ?

Excitedly, he reached out and thumbed the radio over to *send.* " Tomas, I think I've got it !" He explained briefly.

Tomas did not answer straight away; when he did, his voice was harsh. " I see. You've done a good job, doc. Your name will go down in history. Is there anything you'd like us to do for you back on Earth ?"

" Eh ? " Peter's blood ran cold. " What do you mean ?"

" Don't you know ? Can't you tell that you've been affected by these things—in spite of your suit ? You must realise that we can't risk letting you come back on board the *Quest.*"

Peter licked his lips. Long before any ship could bring a real team of planet investigators, the spacetug's supplies would have given out. The immensity of interstellar space did not bear thinking about. " Aren't you going to give me any more time ?"

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"Do *you* think we ought to? Isn't it our duty to get back to Earth? Earth must know about this planet—and the titanium discovery—and these big ships."

Peter tried hard not to think that Tomas might be saying those things because of the bad feeling between them. Tomas was not devoid of all humanity. Yet he felt sure that if the Captain had been able to issue an order, there would have been less haste. "Give me another hour," he urged. "If I'm to be left behind . . . at least give me a chance to die usefully. Don't make someone else go through all this over again. I'm sure I'm on the brink of something."

"Very well, then." The hesitation was apparent. Perhaps, thought Peter, it was lucky that Ken was there as a witness of all this. "You do something, that's all," snapped Tomas. "I'm sick of seeing you fiddling to no effect!"

Peter sighed with relief, and immediately found himself struggling against a fresh and increased confusion within his mind. Apparently only the need to face the recent crisis had brought clarity. He bent his head so that his twitching face would be hidden from the watchers on board the *Quest*.

All down the front of his thick suit hairs were wriggling. Thousands of them, each with a life of its own.

Flaggella from the globes!

Horrified, he beat at them, trying to crush or dislodge the tiny creatures—but almost immediately realising the futility of such actions, since they were on his arms, too, and so all over him.

Now he could *never* return to the *Quest*. –No, that was muddy thinking. The situation was not much changed. The vacuum of space would destroy anything alive that was exposed to it . . . He could go back . . . if he could persuade Tomas and Ken to have him. But that did not apply to the others. If he put the Captain and Bill into suits they would carry the infestation with them . . .

If only his head would stay clear! Single cell creatures multiplied by division. Just one on the inside of a suit or on or within a man would carry the peril right into the *Quest*.

He replaced the cover on the container with shaking hands. It fitted closely but he sealed it with tape to be quite sure that no more of the hair-like creatures could escape.

Now, how could he dispose of the remainder? He tried desperately to think through the increasing pressure of tensions in his head.

"Look out of the port, doc." Ken's voice over the radio interrupted his thoughts.

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He turned, looking over the inert shapes of Bill and the Captain. Arcturus 707 blazed clear and bright. The planet was eclipsed from the field of view but the slow orbital motion of the tug around the *Quest* had put the alien vessel directly before him. Her companion was half a mile beyond, and similar in appearance. The ports of both ships were open and a dozen spheroid ships were floating steadily towards him.

"Doc!" said Tomas's voice. "This is it. We'll have to leave you."

"No!" Peter tried desperately to think of something. Tomas was a self-seeking man. Make him think that he would have a court of inquiry to face if he returned to Earth before the last moment, and he would stay. "You'd better not. I didn't want to say this, Tomas. But what I put in the log just before leaving would make things look very black for you, if you go before something really happens."

"Before something really happens?" Tomas was finding responsibility too heavy for him—just as the Earthside tests had suggested he might. "Do we have to wait until we are all destroyed? How much longer do you want?"

"Not long."

Peter returned his attention to the task near at hand.

What could he deduce about the parasites, besides the fact they were equally at home on the skins of human beings as on their natural, presumably unthinking hosts?

The globes were evidently water creatures and human skins were moist. Men required a humid atmosphere. He went to the humidity meter on the air conditioner. Suppose he dried out that artificial dampness in the air?

He turned up the heater, cut off the water supply and waited. It would take time. He returned to the acceleration couches. Now he could see the minute hair-like organisms on the skins of the stricken men; before he had missed them amongst the natural hairs of the body. Evidently they could multiply very rapidly under favourable conditions.

After another glance at the humidity meter—the needle was creeping back—he remembered Tomas amongst the increasing confusion of his thoughts and went to the radio.

"I—think I've got a means of clearing the infection—" he managed to say. "Anything happened to—you?"

"Not yet." It was Ken's tense voice answering him. Even Ken sounded as though he thought all this was just playing for time. They didn't think he could do it.

He stumbled to the meter. The needle was going back very slowly, the temperature shooting up.

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He couldn't feel the heat inside his suit but his mind seemed full of devils whispering incoherently, now wildly, now as though trying to argue with him. He tried not to mumble to himself. He wanted to run—but there was nowhere to run—no escape from the prison of this little cabin. He must get out !

Panic overwhelmed him. Then something stronger than his own will compelled him to stop with one hand on the airlock.

In horror at what he had been about to do, he tore at the fastenings of his suit. Without its protection, he would not be able to go back to endanger the others on the *Quest*. The courage to throw it off would at least save them. If his nerve went again and he opened the tug, he would die quickly, but Ken and Tomas would live to carry the news to Earth.

Struggling clear of the suit was like coming out of a mental jungle into the physical sensations of a scorching desert. Dry, burning air caught at his throat and prickled on his skin but he found himself looking around the interior of the cabin with clear eyes. On the shiny covers of the acceleration seats hair-like creatures squirmed and came together into centipedes that moved in haphazard, frantic fashion on flailing legs. Tiny individuals still came crawling out of the clothing floating loosely around the naked men, still came off their drying skins to form more communal creatures in an attempt to escape the dry heat destroying them.

Peter felt something on his lips. Wriggling, tiny, hair-like . . . Instinctive reaction was to spit it out, but a greater knowledge halted him. Simultaneous with its presence came vague voices of Tomas and Ken . . . But not *voices*, he realised, for the radio was silent, and there was something more direct, more fundamental about this new contact. Fear and hesitation was in both men's minds, sensed clearly. Both wished to put the *Quest* to flight, but hesitated for their differing reasons.

" I'm better . . ." a voice said.

Peter found Captain Fryer standing behind him. In the clear eyes glowed a new awareness—the same as coursed through his own brain, and their minds met without speech in knowledge of what had happened to them. Peter gasped. No casebook held details of such a parasite—two hours fever, then *awareness* . . .

On the two giant ships preparations for attack hesitated. Their builders were powerful—but just. For centuries the patrol had roamed their part of the Galaxy, discovering, helping and sometimes slaying. Small, helpless, insignificant life could exist. Great, fully-aware,

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intelligent life could exist also. But between was a huge group, creatures intelligent, yet without the ability to understand and control —creatures who could lie, cheat, rob and murder, because mind could not see into mind, nor brain contact brain. Such intelligent but untelepathic creatures must die, because a menace to world beyond world. The aliens had felt regret as their instruments had shown the approaching *Quest*, for this was obviously an intelligent and highly developed race, although no telepathic emanations came from it across Space.

They had been patient, eager for some hint of even a dormant power which could be developed. But none had come from the gesticulating biped's mind. Finally, they had returned to their own ship aware that here was a new, promising race, but one which might have to die.

There was just one chance left. Right from the first contact, they had brought all their mental power to bear in an effort to influence the bipeds towards the one planet in this part of Space which had natural conditions like those that had been detected in the intruding ship. It was possible, although not always certain, that telepathic parasites could provide the ability that nature had not.

Time had shown that they could in this case.

The equipments with which the Earth ship could have been destroyed like a snuffed spark were withdrawn into the hull. Between the captains of the two alien vessels communication and new hope fled. Perhaps, after all, this race need not be destroyed. No, they and their ship could live . . .

"Captain Fryer here," a voice snapped, somehow allowing no argument. "Prepare to take us aboard."

"Yes, sir."

Peter heard the words through a confused haze of images, but he knew that condition would pass, as surely as had the fevers of Bill and the Captain. But the look he had seen in Fryer's eyes had demonstrated that the new awareness, however, would not pass. It was worth a few hours' fever while the parasites multiplied in a man's body, he decided; a score of germs and bacteria normally inhabiting mankind were less useful.

His pulse was growing uneven, his brow hot. A doctor's training helped, after all. Fryer and Bill had not been able to understand, and it had been their instinctive resistance to the unknown which had brought about that frightening mental condition. They had not known what it meant when they had become hosts. They had thought only

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of a difficult-to-work metal and jelly blobs able to crystalize it easily. His fever rising, Peter thought of neither. Instead, his mind reached out through the confusion of his comrades' thoughts and contacted minds in the two alien ships.

The whole of mankind could be telepathic now, and what mattered it that a parasite produced the effect ?

Bill Blundell's strong arm was encircling his shoulders, Bill's homely face—although indistinct—was certainly grinning again, but it wasn't Bill's voice that came briefly into his mind—it was the typically mocking but encouraging thought: " Happy dreams, Peter. We're going home."

Content, he realised that his companions were preparing to enter the *Quest*. Then stupor dimmed his vision.

Francis G. Rayer and E. R. James.

New York's World Convention

In our March issue we stated that readers wishing to take out Convention Membership in this year's 14th World Science Fiction Convention to be held in New York on September 1st, 2nd, and 3rd should send $2.00 to the Convention Secretary in New York. Many readers have written and pointed out that this is not practicable owing to the Exchange Control. Arrangements have therefore been made with the New York Convention Committee for British readers to send 7/6 to their London representative : Mr. Charles Duncombe, 82 Albert Square, London, E.15.

This will entitle Members to all pre-Convention booklets and material plus a souvenir copy of the Programme. Letters should be marked " 14th World S-F Convention."

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SUN CYCLE

When Man finally establishes a foothold on the Outer planets, or their satellites, and builds an observation station for scientific purposes, the life of the crew will be one of deadly monotony. Place one man in such a predicament as having the Station fail and his mind will dominate his body in the will to survive.

By Duncan Lamont

The sun was away, beating its fiery track through the void. Outside, the little world was dying: curling up within itself, sealing off, stilling into hibernation. The crystals were growing over the deep pools, fencing the rushing fluids, lacing the outer walls of the Station. The colours had flown: following the heat-trail of the retreating star into the empty wastes of Space . . .

He sat in the main cabin, an ant's egg in some enormous goldfish bowl. The smooth curve of the walls converged above him on the observation platform which hung suspended from the roof—flat, squat, and ugly. Before him, pointers moved meticulously over a great dial set in the wall. They packed and parcelled hours and minutes into days, pushing the resultant package into the limbo of infinite pasts. Time—true time—had followed the sun.

Normally, his mind was filled with the ceaseless naggings of jobs to be done. They would rush tirelessly around in his brain, distracting his attention from the ports and the darkness and the void. That was a part of their function they fulfilled admirably. But today—this Now—they cried in vain. For there was a greater worry gnawing voraciously at his protective shell.

The Station was crippled.

Somewhere, under the mighty blocks of machine-hewn rock, behind the sealed, pressure-held doors, flux was leaking from the Pile. The regenerative cycle was slowing under the persistent drain of the Station. The Pile was undamping, burning itself out in an attempt to keep the services operative. The story was as plain as the black, quivering, input needle on its white, scaled background.

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The pad on his knee was covered with symbols and figures that told the story from another angle: his. They plotted the gently curving down-slope of power against intervals of time. A thin red line of life-extinction bled across the graph parallel to the time axis. It intersected the power curve lingeringly: meeting . . . crossing . . . parting . . . It was an arrowhead of a cross flying swiftly along a line of minimum requirements; and he could feel the barb already, pressing urgently against his flesh.

Patterns flicked through his inward vision like polka-dots on a ticker-tape. He tossed the pad aside, slowed the tape, and tried to concentrate . . .

A small planet-type body, said the dots precisely, *travelling in a fantastically elongated orbit through the Solar System. Time for one cycle: ten home-years. Origin of body: uncertain, but definitely extra-solar. Mission: to establish an observation base on the planet. Purpose: detailed study of Outer Planets beyond present range of rocket travel . . .*

The data blurred in a kaleidoscope of swiftly moving images: the year-long preparatory shuttling of parts into Space; the sun-blasted weeks of construction work; the blind, narrow-angled drive to finish the Station in the few months of perihelion; the frenzied rush of weeks, days, hours, minutes . . .

Then, for him alone, the long empty drag of weeks and months and years . . .

The tape purred and clicked and was silent, leaving him stranded in the Present.

Power, said the pad, a bland white face on the grey floor. *Power*, whispered the smooth pencil, nuzzling confidingly between his fingers. *Power*, hummed the engines of life around him. The cushioned air took up the cry and pumped it rhythmically through his lungs. Every fibre of his being echoed the nerve-eroding clamour. *Power* that lit the lights, held nothingness at bay, encompassed him in a comforting blanket of ticking, pulsing familiarity. *Power* . . . leaking away into the rocks . . . leaving him . . .

The thought images whirled in a maelstrom of basic emotions, bobbing and submerging, clutching at the ragged edges of his mind. He pressed his palms quickly against his brow, and kept them there until the spasm slackened to a dull throbbing in his head. His hands were damp when finally he lowered them: soaked with the salty spume of fear.

He knew there were things he must do—but they were lying at the bottom of his mind with thoughts he must avoid.

He rose and went to his sleeping quarters. He dissolved two tablets in a glass of water and drank deeply. He lay on his couch and watched while the hardened steel above him melted into dreams.

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His dreams were populous, compensatory things: fit for the loneliest man in the Universe.

He awoke in the next time interval refreshed. His motor nerves responded crisply as he changed his clothes, washed, shaved, and ate. His mind sparkled sharply, like a surgeon's knife; eager to cut to the root of the problem, eradicate waste tissue, adjust the malfunction.

He retrieved his pad, noted the readings, flicked over the page, and started to write. His hand flew over the paper leaving a trail of jostling, anxious-to-please figures. His eye ran along the ranks, picking one here, one there; assembling them into a neat squad to be mustered at the bottom of the sheet. He turned back to the graph and started to plot a new curve. It flattened obediently, skirting clear of the blood-red line, and flew with sweet asymptoticity off the paper. He sighed with satisfaction, and rose to make the necessary alterations to the controls.

The power consumption gauges pitted into the vast panel settled back fractionally. The input gauges from the Pile trembled thankfully. The decay factor sighed—and died.

He climbed the spiderway to the observation platform. The steady hum of the recorders clinging like sensation-sucking leeches to the roof, throbbed against his eardrums. He thumbed the switch of a manual scanner and viewed. The Outside pressed against the screen: pinpoints of light, blurred and misty galaxies, brightly burning alien suns—and hard, uncompromising vacuum.

The mighty splendour of the Outer Planets was no more now than a microscopic trace on the recorder tapes. The Solar System a photographic mirage. And so it would remain until the long sweep of the planet turned inwards once more.

Proud possession filled his mind as he watched the sliding change of pattern. A sense of overlordship, spawned in the vapour-trail of the last retreating rocket, born in isolation, nurtured in the steel-grey sterility of the Station. In the beginning he had fought this feeling bitterly, fearing its effect upon his judgment. But now it was a natural thing that helped to fill the aching solitude around him: the unresisting negation of social pressure that was as absolute as the hollowness between the stars.

He watched for a long time, until the naggings of duty broke through his entrancement. Then he blotted out the Universe with a flick of his finger, descended the spiderway, and went about the humdrum business of doing what the machines could not.

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Period followed period. The hands of the great clock swept their futile cyclic border, bundling the unheeding minutes before them. He gazed down the tunnels between the stars, filling and emptying the hungry maws of the recorders. He ate and drank, slept and woke, worked and dreamed. The lights were fractionally dimmer, the temperature undetectably lower, and the air whispered through the vents more slowly. But there was nothing to disturb his peace of mind.

Until the planet passed aphelion.

He read the gauge on the control panel through an almost tangible mist of terror. He ran his fingernail around the coverglass, following the scale. He let it rest against the pointer and took the reading again. It wasn't necessary to refer to the records—it was too low. He read the rest of the dials hurriedly, slurring the figures down carelessly on the pad. His mind was tabulating power consumptions in a fear-driven frenzy; trying to reduce the irreducible, dispense with the indispensable.

"Where's the flux *going*?" he asked aloud.

The question echoed around the walls, losing meaning with every collision. The dials looked at him blankly, their scales mocking him with wide-lipped grins.

He shivered suddenly, as if the Absolute Zero sitting so patiently outside the walls had found a crack in the defences, and reaching in, touched him. He gathered the pad, and walked quickly over to his desk. Irrationally, he turned his seat sideways that he might view the rest of the cabin's interior while he worked.

The half-held hope of a faulty gauge faded as the other readings were checked. His hand shook as he lifted over the graph and plotted the latest figure. Tentatively, he extrapolated: the cut across the blood-red line was incisive, and so close to the present that he gasped with the shock. Trembling, he started to work out economies. But the symbols crawled and writhed beneath his gaze, slithering greasily over the surface of the paper, eluding the graspings of his overwrought mind. He could feel the tensions within his body screaming for relief. His nerves were taut steel wires, wanting but a microgram of loading to send them curling and lashing destructively through his brain.

He pushed the pad aside slowly, carefully, and sat looking at the calm grey of the desktop. The hidden springs within him strained silently . . .

The shrilling plaint of an empty recorder beat with sudden vehemence about his ears. The placid grey flowed aside as he turned his head, to be replaced by inhuman velvet ports and mocking chalk-white dials. He rose and walked to the control panel. His finger stabbed viciously at a button. The recorder died whining.

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Three and a half years, he thought.

His fingers ran along the panel killing the seeing eyes, the tape-like senses. Soon there was no sound in the Station but the soft whispering of the air-conditioners.

Forty-two months, he thought.

Apart from his sleeping quarters, the Station was dead. He gathered what he required into the cramped space and closed the inner airlock firmly behind him.

Thirteen hundred days, he thought . . .

Time was leaking back into the little world. A star grew and bloomed into a pale yellow disc. Once in a revolution it shone weakly through the encrusted ports, stirring faint shapes into the blackness. Wan images looked inward on the main cabin, where the all-consuming vacuum had claimed its hostage.

Inside the sleeping quarters, in a cell within a cell, cocooned in steel, a figure lay on a couch. The only star was a dimly-lit bulb in the ceiling. The only sound was the erratic throbbing of the emergency conditioner. The room was cold, and the breath rising from the couch hung mistily in the atmosphere.

He pulled the meagre blanket close about him for the millionth time—but by now even the fibres had an ice-cold sheath. His eyes flickered around the walls, returning always to the roof and its misty glow. His ears, absorbing the uncertain beat of the conditioner, sent sympathetic pulses drumming through his brain. Reason, lingering numbly, attempted fitfully to correlate his situation with his surroundings. But these were desultory efforts quickly nullified by the omnipresent sense of utter detachment impressed upon him by his metal tomb. Only the light on the roof and the subdued—blessedly capricious—throbbing, assured him that he was still alive. Time crawled and leapt with the sonic waves; life suffered in the nebulous glow of the bulb; ease and comfort were phantasmagoria from another dimension.

He lay and waited for the light to die. And—in time and Space—it did.

A momentary redness as the death of the Pile smeared it into oblivion—then darkness, cruel and complete. The sound of the conditioner died with it, like the stilling of a tired heart as the eyes close. The walls of the room vanished, receding into the infinite, leaving him suspended on the brink of an eternal drop.

For an instant he thought he had died. Then the ice-cold rasp of the cover against his hand rescued him, dragging him back from the mind's ease of death to the brutal pounding of his lungs in the fast-

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staling air. Incredibly, his body accepted the challenge and rose scrambling through the void. Out of the emptiness, his flailing hands brushed against the suit.

His muscles, baffled by the darkness, rusted with disuse, struggled with the stiff plastic; his mind, roused from despair to panic, fumbled with blurred images of things that should have been familiar. Time —measured by the palpitating flood of blood through his veins— wound off a rapidly shrinking reel.

Then, at last, the helmet was in place and his gloved fingers scrabbled at the oxygen control. Sweet untainted air washed through the suit, permeating his lungs. The richness warmed him, thawing the last traces of lethargy. He stood erect in his last, smallest refuge, and considered the precious hours ahead. The Universe—*his* Universe— beckoned through a metal veil. He stepped towards the airlock . . .

The main cabin was a dead deserted waiting room in the long reaches of the night. He walked across the expectantly echoing metal to the outer lock.

The great door swung slowly on the manual control: a crescent of star-flecked velvet grew and grew. He walked out onto faintly gleaming rock . . .

The horizon was a celestial gap torn raggedly from the star-fields. Vast shards of stone threw their blanking fingers upwards. The firmament was anchored over the black bay of the planet.

He gazed at the intrusive land resentfully, and felt his regality dwindling. The nightmare blackness seeped into his mind, destroying the last illusion . . .

Then the sun came !

It sprang over the mountains casting long shafts that broke and scattered on the ground. The brightness beat in and around his helmet forcing his hand to the filters. Now it glowed in true perspective, a wan yellow disc in the immensity of sky. But it carried a magic with it that radiated through the filter and took his brain by storm.

" Look !" he whispered. " Look there !" The words cannoned around his helmet, and the sun smiled pale approval.

He stood taut until it was swimming clearly in the sky: then he relaxed. He lifted his filters and glanced down.

The crystals were melting !

Delighted, he knelt to watch them. The shrinking needles, the growing pools in the hollows, sent shivers of ecstasy running through his body. Little shards of colour fell through the dwindling forms causing them to glitter and glisten. The stars destroyed by the sun's incursion had been sprinkled over the surface of the planet.

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He rose and looked about him. The world was filled with colour: it bathed the rocks and mountains with their melting blankets; it shimmered with heart-catching iridescences in waking fluids; it glowed in the rising mists from the valleys.

He walked until he came to a stream. He sat on the ground beside it wondering at the growing strength of the rushing fluid. As the feeble sun rose further in the heavens, floes broke free and jostled past his outstretched arm. The thaw was splitting the cold-encrusted surface of the planet—and melting the hard, deep-frozen sheath around his mind. Memories of hope-budded seasons on another planet crowded through his consciousness, softening the contours of the land about him. His eyes watched the symbol of spring tumbling past at his side, and his mind wandered through sunlit fields and down dawn-enchanted paths.

He died two hours later when his oxygen supply was exhausted. His body slipped forward into the steam of liquid ammonia. When the sun set, the fluid froze once more . . .

Two months later a ship came sliding down from the sky onto sun-blasted rock. The crystals and the fluids were distorting vapours under the blazing orb of summer. Two men descended from the ship and entered the Station. They read the bleak mechanical story of the death of the Pile with practised ease, and speculated on the reason. After a further search, they found the crewman . . .

" Hell-planet," said the first man softly. " What a place to die . . ."

The other stood with rivulets of sweat draining down his face and said: " The winter . . . nine years of winter. And into a summer like this . . ."

They knelt and turned him over.

" My God," said the first man, looking at the set frame inside the helmet. " I'll swear he's smiling !"

" A trick of the light," said the other quickly, shivering in his overheated suit. " Nine years of winter . . ."

They returned to the Station and collected the records.

The thought of a nine-year winter haunted the second man all the way back to Earth. But it was May when they landed and the trees round the Base were budding green.

He soon forgot.

Duncan Lamont.

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With the Centauran system of worlds as advance bases and their inhabitants as allies the Terran High Command begins to move its battle fleet into position for the first large-scale engagement with the Rihnans—as move and counter-move takes place, with Captain Brady a most important pawn in the game, the Galaxy begins to assume the pattern of a gigantic chess-board.

WHO SPEAKS OF CONQUEST ?

By Lan Wright

Illustrated by QUINN

Part Three of Four Parts

FOREWORD

By AD 2200 interplanetary travel within the Solar System has been achieved; Venus, Mars and Earth being the Three-Planet governing body for expansion and colonisation, with central control vested in Hugo Bannerman, President of the World Senate on Earth. The first interstellar expedition, led by Commander Stephen Brady of the United Terran Space Fleet, returns from the region of Sirius to inform the President that not only is there intelligent life there but that the Galaxy abounds in life forms governed by an advanced technological race of people called Rihnans.

The Centaurans whom Brady contacted explained that the Rihnans kept the balance of power by the strength of their weapons which they

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gave freely to lesser races, none of whom had ever managed to solve the mysteries of the Rihnan science, so complex was it. The Terrans are expected to join the Rihnan Galactic Federation as vassal allies, but Bannerman decides to make a fight of it and when the Rihnan ambassador arrives to discuss the terms one of his escort craft is captured and hidden in Siberia for the Terran scientists to examine.

Professor Hartmann, in charge of the investigation, solves a number of the Rihnan secrets and Bannerman gives the order for a huge Terran fleet to be built. Three years later, their patience exhausted, the Rihnans send the Centauran battle fleet to teach the Terrans a sharp lesson, but the fleet falls into a well-laid trap and is completely annihilated, their flagship being captured and taken to a base on the Moon. Some weeks later Brady, now promoted to Captain, and a picked crew land the captured flagship at Meron, capital city of the Centauran system, and demand their unconditional co-operation in the Terran drive for a Galactic Empire. With no choice in the matter the Centaurans agree and part of the Terran fleet is deployed throughout the Centauran system as a protective measure. Brady reports to Admiral Sherman in charge of the Terran fleet and requests permission to take a converted Centauran cruiser and scout along the area of Rihnan control.

Permission being granted he takes his close friend Lieutenant Wilson along as second-in-command and they eventually discover a Lyran freighter plying between systems. Brady and four Centaurans visit the freighter, leaving Murphy in charge of the cruiser. Not long after Brady and his party have boarded the Lyran ship radio contact is abruptly lost between them and Murphy is staggered to find that the Lyran ship has completely disappeared. No trace of it can be found despite intensive searching—one moment the ship was in full view, the next space was empty. Murphy eventually returns to Admiral Sherman and reports the failure of the mission and Brady's disappearance. Sherman sends an urgent request to Earth to put Professor Hartmann on the job of unravelling the mystery.

Meanwhile, in the middle of listening to the Lyrans talking with the Centaurans, Brady suddenly sees the stars disappear and the ship is enclosed by a black void—at the same time he finds that he is confronted by a Rihnan. The trap has been sprung and Brady has been caught in it. To his dismay he finds that the Rihnan is a telepath and there seems little chance of being able to conceal his knowledge of the Terran secrets.

The Lyran ship returns to its base and Brady is subjected to intensive mental interrogation—at first he manages to block these probes but as the pressure mounts he finds his thoughts acting strangely. Suddenly there is a blinding mental explosion as his mind collapses under the strain. When he recovers the Rihnan interrogators are unconscious at his feet.

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Back at Admiral Sherman's H.Q. on Meron, Professor Hartmann's assistant Ben Wilson discovers the secret of the Rihnan disappearing trick with the Lyran freighter—a hidden control on all ships which allows them to be warped out of the normal space continuum. He thinks that he can improve on the Rihnan design and while he gets to work Murphy proposes to Admiral Sherman that he be allowed to make a commando raid on the suspected Rihnan H.Q. on the planet Tekron, where it is assumed Brady will have been taken. After deliberating whether Brady would still be alive or not, Sherman agrees.

XII.

How long he remained unconscious Brady did not know, nor did he ever find out. He came to slowly, his mind fumbling painfully and hazily as it struggled back to the crest of consciousness. He had to fight, so it seemed, every step of the way back from the very first moment when dim awareness of existence forced its way through the blackness which enveloped him, and at last he became aware that there were others in the room, there were urgent proddings in his mind which urged him to recover and say what had happened, but all of this was secondary to the bewilderment about his own position.

Brady sat up, his eyes blinking painfully at the sudden influx of light, and he saw that there were half a dozen or more Rihnans in the room. Two of them stood in front of him, and he could feel the prickling in his brain as their thought-streams demanded to know what had happened.

Automatically and dazedly he tried to silence the lancing pain in his head by stopping the incoming thoughts, "I don't know. I—Lord, my head ! I don't know what happened."

He dropped his head in his hands, aware above all else that it ached abominably and that he wanted to be sick.

"It is obvious that he knows nothing."

"But what could have happened ?"

"Probably we shall never know, they are in a complete cataleptic state. They may never recover consciousness."

The two separate minds sounded in Brady's own as if they were spoken aloud. He looked up in alarm, but there was only the sound of the Rihnans as they moved about the room and studied the three inert bodies on the floor. His memory flooded back to him and with it came bewilderment about what had happened. Why could he suddenly hear outside thoughts as easily as if they had been spoken out loud ? He searched desperately for an answer, and as he searched he picked up sudden snatches of other alien thought-streams.

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"Impossible—"

"The Earthman has no such latent power—immature race—"

"He was caught like them."

"Yes, only his weak brain saved him from whatever caused it—"

And as the messages poured in and his brain took hold of the situation he was aware of a facility about his mental actions which he had never known before, as if a curtain had been drawn aside in a darkened room and sunlight was now pouring in to reveal the beauty that lay therein.

For the moment his existence had been forgotten by the Rihnans and in that short time in which he sank into insignificance his brain sought and found an almost impossible explanation for the bewildering events. His mind gagged at the vistas which were opened before him as a result of that frantic five minutes during which he fought the combined impact of three alien minds, and yet there could be no other explanation. The ferocity of that onslaught had forced him to defend himself with every means available, conscious or unconscious, and he could not even guess at the primeval forces which had liberated some hitherto unused portion of his mind so that it could fight back. Of the success of that fight there could be no doubt, the three bodies on the floor bore witness to that, as did the strange sense of freedom which he felt within his brain. His thoughts probed, undetected and unhindered, through the minds of the Rihnans around him and gave further evidence of his new powers.

He sat still, his head buried in his hands, while his mind roamed unfettered through the amazing realms of thought and counter-thought that were opened up to him, and as he did so another part of him watched, guardedly, the reactions of the Rihnans. He realised that in some respects he would have to be even more on his guard than previously, for while he could combat the probings of his mind in the future, he would have to be careful that in doing so he gave no hint of his new mental stature.

He became aware of a preliminary probing in his mind and he put up a carefully contrived blanket of bewilderment to meet it, and after a few seconds it vanished. He probed quickly in the wake of the receding thought-stream and he read satisfaction of his apparent ignorance in the mind of the Rihnan. Presently they left him, taking the three inert bodies with them and Brady found himself alone once more.

Apart from three quick and superficial interviews on what had happened he was left alone for seven days, and it was obvious from the minds of the Rihnans who visited him that the mystery of their three

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cataleptic comrades was worrying them considerably. They could find no evidence to connect him with the matter and yet they were reluctant to ignore him altogether, since in their view he was the one unknown factor involved.

Brady used his new powers cautiously during that time, partly to test them and partly to make certain that time did not dull them, and he earned that the building he was in constituted the Rihnan headquarters for the planetary system of the star Tekrir. The remainder of the city was inhabited by natives of the planet, Tekron, which was the largest of the five inhabited planets in the system.

Despite this new activity Brady found that his confinement began to pall. There were no windows in his room, and he found little pleasure in the periodic visits of the Rihnans who examined him and attended to his personal needs. They were still just like so many Chinamen as far as discrimination went. He made an enquiry of one who brought his food as to the prospects of being allowed out for exercise and fresh air.

"Guarded, of course," he added with a smile, but apparently his facial expressions were as meaningless to the Rihnans as were his spoken words. He received a fleeting, disinterested impression that his request would be considered, and then he was alone once more.

Brady dismissed the matter from his mind with some disappointment and resigned himself to a long period of close confinement, and he was more than a little surprised when two of them came soon after his next meal and informed him that he would be allowed to walk at will through the city for an hour or so each day, with them acting as his escorts. His mildly elated thanks were completely ignored.

Brady took more pleasure than he had expected in that first tour among the high, blue buildings, beneath the eerie blue sun. The gravity affected him a little and he did not walk as far as he would have done on Earth under similar circumstances. The city was regular in design, all the streets were long and wide, and straight, and all the buildings tall and made of the same material. There was little distinction between them that was apparent to Brady, save that some were a little shorter and others a little wider, some were obviously homes and others were obviously not, but beyond that they presented an alien similarity which would become monotonous if he was long among them.

His interest lay entirely in the strangeness of his new surroundings for the human race had not yet become so used to alien contacts and alien worlds that they ceased to be interesting. The two Rihnans guarding him were not interested, he could read that in their minds, but he found that it was their minds alone of all the multitudes

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thronging the city with which he could make contact. The stocky, blue-skinned Tekronians who made up the bulk of the population, chattered aloud and unintelligibly among themselves, making up a babel which was reminiscent of London or Paris or any other great city, but of their minds and their thoughts he could detect nothing. It was as if he was seeking knowledge in the blank, blue stone of the buildings around him. With them it was as if he had not the mental power which he used so successfully on the Rihnans and he remembered the words of the first Rihnan he had ever encountered.

"They have not the same type of mind—"

He wondered morbidly if that was the reason for the Rihnans overwhelming superiority in the technical and scientific sense, and concluded that it was.

Everywhere he searched away from the Rihnans he was met with blank, unrewarding silence, as if those other minds did not exist. There were other races too, and his experience with them was the same. He saw many of them during his outings, in ones and twos, or in small parties, all of them humanoid to a great extent though some had basic differences in their makeup, such as extra limbs or organs. Chiefly, the differences were in size and colouring; some were built on mammoth lines with bulging muscles rippling on thick-set torsos, obviously the products of planets with heavier gravity than that of Tekron. Yet others were tall and willowy, slender and fragile, and they moved with even more difficulty than did Brady.

In greater contrast were the black-skinned race with three legs and four arms, and the red people whose limbs were octopus-like tentacles, two acting as legs and four as arms, but even there he could see definite humanoid resemblance in the shape of their bodies and the arrangement of their heads. And all of them were oxygen breathers.

But through all that conglomeration of races from all over the Galaxy, Brady met with only silence in their minds. The dull realisation shocked him deeply when he thought about it, and he wondered what would have happened to them all had the Rihnans not presented them with a technological civilisation on a plate; he could not picture it.

It was on the fourth of his outings that Brady became aware that he and his escorts were being watched. The realisation came to him at first more by instinct than by observation, and certainty came to him by the fact that he was seeing a great deal more of one particular being than he would have expected under the circumstances and his curiosity was aroused.

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His escorts noticed nothing unusual, he could tell that from their minds, and Brady made certain that he gave them no suspicions on the matter. During the next few periods of liberty in the swarming streets of the city he noted the appearance of the grey-bearded humanoid with the large, deep-set eyes and the odd antennae which sprouted from his forehead, one over each eye, with ever-increasing interest. Apart from the antennae the being was easily recognisable by the large, beautifully shaped ring which he wore on one finger of his left hand, and the carved, glittering walking staff which he carried in his right. He appeared two or three times during each period of exercise, sometimes walking towards them, sometimes passing them from behind, and often just standing at the side of the road apparently admiring the scenery. On no occasion did he give any sign that he noticed the presence of Brady and the two Rihnans escorting him, and the more it happened the more puzzled about it Brady became.

The climax came suddenly and unexpectedly. Brady had spotted the being for the third time during one outing when, without any warning, and almost without premeditation, Brady threw an enquiring thought-stream at the stranger as he passed them on one of the busier avenues. For a moment he refused to believe what his new senses told him as there lay before him, open to his sudden probing, a mind, alert and unprepared. Just for a moment he touched it, and then it was gone even as he began to explore it, and it closed against him as if it had never been. The stranger vanished into the crowds and Brady never saw him on Tekron again.

The experience was so quick and so unexpected that Brady was shaken from his usual, quick-thinking calm. He faltered in his stride and half turned to follow the being, cannoning into his two guards as he did so. He read quick annoyance in their minds, and slight puzzlement as some unwitting thought he had let slide through his ever present barrier, reached them, and he derided himself roundly for having slipped. For such a slip, properly interpreted by his captors, would prove fatal, of that he was sure. Apart from that his escorts showed no concern, and he realised that they had no inkling of what had taken place.

Back in his room he tried to puzzle the whole thing out but without result, for there was too little to go on. He wondered, with illogical hope, if the being was an Earthman in disguise, and part of some complicated plot to rescue him. He put it regretfully aside as he reminded himself that no one knew where he was, and even if they did they would hardly be likely to risk other lives and ships to get him out.

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There was always the mystery of the stranger's mind which he had probed so successfully and just as easily as if it had been a Rihnan or an Earthman. From that evidence alone the being must have been either a Rihnan or a Human. Brady swore angrily to himself as he realised that the stocky, bearded stranger could not possibly be a Rihnan, therefore—he cursed again, for with those antennae the being could not be Human, unless—and he was back to the disguise theory again.

It was possible that he had under-estimated his own importance and that efforts had been made successfully to locate him. His spirits rose excitedly at the prospect, and then dropped. No human had his mental powers and yet the stranger had sensed, had met, and had defeated his mental probing. That was something which even the Rihnans could not do, as he proved on numerous occasions. The facts and fancies of the problem twisted and turned within his brain until they became irrevocably confused and he shrugged them off with exasperated impatience. Yet despite it all there lingered in his mind an unwarranted hope that rescue would come before long.

XIII.

A week after Brady's strange encounter his two escorts came, as usual, after his midday meal. He rose in preparation for his period of exercise, but the thought-stream of one of them reached out and told him, "We are to take you before the President of the Rihnan Hierarchy. Your exercise period has been cancelled for today."

Brady's surprise was as genuine as it was obvious.

"It appears that you have heard of the President?"

"Yes," agreed Brady carefully, "I learned of him from the Centaurans. I am honoured—"

The thought was brushed angrily aside, "The President comes not to honour you but to question you about your race. You will come now."

As he followed them from the room Brady's mind, behind his carefully maintained mental barrier, was a turmoil of speculation. He wondered with some apprehension if the Rihnans had connected him with the accident which had befallen his three original interrogators, and had concealed the fact from him until such time as they could bring greater pressure to bear upon him without risk of the consequences. He remembered his first meeting with the Centaurans on Sirius Five all those years ago; that was when he had first heard of the President, and of his power, and Brady knew that if any one person as the real ruler of the Galaxy it was he.

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His escorts wasted no time, and the pace at which they took him to where the President was waiting had him gasping for breath; it was obvious that the President did not like to be kept waiting. The room in which they left him was the largest he had yet seen and it was in the same building. In front of wide, high windows through which filtered the light of the blue sun, was a wide, semi-circular table behind which sat seven Rihnans. Their clothes gave notice of their importance, and none was more important than the one who sat in the centre.

Apart from his magnificent, though simple dress, the material of which Brady could not even guess at, he had an aura about him which compelled attention, his personality with all its alien qualities gave Brady warning of his power even before his mind reached out and urged Brady to take a seat in front of the table. The other six, though obviously above the class and standard of those he had met so far, were so outshone by the one in their midst that Brady automatically dismissed them as non-entities.

He sat down, and as he did so the all-too-familiar pricking came within his mind. During his hurried journey from his prison room he had decided what he should do, and he had to admit to himself afterwards that the cover of fear and bewilderment which he put out in defence had not been entirely assumed. He was more than just apprehensive. He shifted uneasily in his seat and felt a faint prickle of sweat break out on his forehead. His eyes were drawn, as if by magnets, towards the hypnotic gaze of the President who looked dispassionately and fathomlessly at him. No, his fear was not wholly assumed.

After what seemed an age the probing ended.

" Tell me, Earthman of what are you afraid ?"

Brady licked his lips, " I am far from my home and my people, and in circumstances I do not fully understand." The reply slid neatly from him, but that one experience told him that here was a mind as superior to those other Rihnans as they were to the other races of the Galaxy. Personality was not only external it was mental as well.

" There is much that we wish to know about your race," came the thought again.

" But I have already told you all I can," Brady hoped it sounded convincing.

" Nevertheless, we will go through it again."

So the three had not recovered, and they did not connect him with it. Brady felt a growing confidence behind the mental barrier he was using, and he knew that he might well be able to conceal all that would be important. Fear and bewilderment were all he could show

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that would fight for him, and with his apparent fear and bewilderment the Rihnan President might well be lulled into thinking he knew less than he actually did. And then it began, much as it had been before only there were seven of them and the questions flowed in so fast and so fluently that it was as much as he could do to sift those to be answered from those to which he must, at all costs, profess ignorance.

They covered every facet of human existence and ambition, how the people lived and how they had gained superiority over the Centaurans what was the strength of fighting forces in men and material and what were the secrets of their weapons; what was the real extent of their mental capacity and how much did they know about the Rihnan civilisation. From every side the questions poured in and answers were demanded so quickly that Brady's bewilderment passed from the assumed to the reality, and after bewilderment came pain as his head began to ache under the pressure, and with the pain went his physical strength. It ate into every corner of his being, dragging him down into a pit of exhaustion so that he had to fight every inch of the way to keep up his deception.

It went on for hour after hour, questions repeated so that facts could be verified, "Last time you told us—"

"I am confused—"

"Why did the Centauran weapons fail?"

"I don't know, only our scientists—"

"How large are the Earth fleets?"

"I know of seven or eight hundred first line cruisers—"

"You qouted a thousand before."

The facts and figures whirled in his mind in kaleidoscopic fashion and still he hung on, though by now his brain was reeling on the threshold of unconsciousness, and if he did black out God only knew what they would wring from him if the barrier collapsed through his physical exhaustion. The light from the windows began to hurt his eyes and his vision went out of focus so suddenly that he almost vomited where he sat with the suddenness of the reaction. His brain began to spin under the pounding it was getting and he felt his mind reeling on the brink of sanity.

As suddenly as it began, it ended, and his mind felt as if it was his own once more; there was peace where before there had been torment. He sat slumped in his seat hardly crediting that it had finished.

Cautiously he probed out with his own mind seeking gently and ready to withdraw at the first indication of suspicion.

"We shall learn no more from him. It is clear that he is only a minor officer in the Terran military forces."

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" We have learned a great deal," interposed another Rihnan.

" I could have wished that it were more."

" Are you sure— ?"

" He was on the brink of losing his mind when we stopped. No being could resist in that state, and I think we have learned enough."

" What shall we do now ?"

There was a pause and Brady was aware that the President had turned his great luminous eyes to look at him again. For a moment he feared that he had been detected but the fear faded at once as he read only contemplation within the other's mind, contemplation of the problems which Earth's conquest of the Centauran system had raised for the whole of the Rihnan race.

" It is clear that the Terrans must soon make a move to consolidate their present conquests. I believe that they will break out into the rest of the Galaxy in order to hold more territory and grab more ships and weapons, for the more races they can conquer the more allies they will have to fight against us."

" Surely no race would turn against us ?"

" The Centaurans have done, not actively I agree, but if the Terrans have much more success then they will do all in their power to make good their position with their new conquerors. The answer is to mobilise our entire fleets and hold them ready in three large groups so that they are on hand when the Terran breakout comes. From their position I would judge that they must move in one of three directions, towards Raygol and the Galactic centre, towards Arakos and the western sectors, or eastwards towards Menator. If we cover those three approaches then whichever direction they strike towards we shall have sufficient strength to meet them and hold them until the other two fleets can join battle."

The names meant nothing to Brady but he realised the importance of the thoughts he had tapped. Simple though the plan was it would be of inestimable value if Sherman could be given details of it, for he would have something on which to base his own strategy instead of jabbing out blindly until he got a reaction. If he did that in complete ignorance then the reaction he was likely to get could be fatal to the Terran cause. If he could tell Sherman, Brady laughed bitterly to himself, if pigs could fly !

" What about the Terran weapons ?" he heard the thought as it was sent to the President from one of the others at the table.

" We have learned something from the Centaurans that were taken with this Earthman," was the response. " Not much, but enough to tell us that the Terrans have adapted our own weapons in ways which we never dreamed possible, so that they are quite superior to anything we have."

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Brady sensed the consternation that the news aroused in the other Rihnans, it was obvious that they had not been told before.

There was a hint almost of terror as one of them said, "But if that is so, then how can we hope to combat them?"

There was a thin, contemptuous, alien chuckle as the President responded. "Do not fear, we have technicians already working on the problem. We have one valuable asset which the Terrans do not yet know about, our invisibility field—"

"But surely they must know about it?"

"If they did we should never have captured this Earthman. Our technicians have been working on additional power sources so that our ships will be able to move within the field, and they have been successful. With that as an element of surprise coupled with our superiority in numbers I am confident that we shall be successful. I agree that our losses may be heavy, but the main thing is to crush this threat before it becomes too great to deal with."

"Will sufficient vessels be equipped in time?"

"We shall see that they are."

Brady lifted his head. The pain was ebbing now, and he did not wish to attract attention by looking more ill than his mind admitted. A moment later he wished he hadn't, for the movement drew the attention of the President to him.

The luminous eyes looked at him, and the thought came to him, "I regret that it was necessary to cause you some discomfort, but you will realise that what you are concerned in is more important than the personal feelings of one being." The thought held no sympathy, it was coldly and dispassionately presenting the fact that if he, the President, thought it necessary Brady would be killed.

He missed the thought which summoned his two escorts and was only aware of them as they came in front of him and motioned him to rise and leave. Back in his prison room he fell thankfully on his bunk and gave up his throbbing being to the blessed oblivion of sleep.

XIV.

Outwardly the ship looked like any other interstellar freighter that might be found on any of the trade routes anywhere in the Galaxy. The external identification proclaimed her to be outward bound from Canopus with general cargo for the Tekrir system. Beneath her squat, ugly hull lay the engines and weapons of a first-line cruiser, and on her control bridge stood Commander Murphy, his mission bearing the ratification of the C-in-C, Admiral Sherman.

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Below and behind him, apart from the hundred and fifty technicians who manned the ship, were two hundred of the finest Space Commandos that Sherman could provide, and with this small force he had to try and grab Brady from under the nose of the Rihnans in the heart of their own territory.

They were twelve days out from Meron, the fleet headquarters, and the tiny blue spot which was the star Tekrir showed brightly in the centre of the view screens. Their speed had been much below the maximum of which the ship was capable, for Murphy had not wished to endanger the mission by causing unnecessary comment about the speed of his craft by other vessels which they might contact. It was irksome to have to jog across space at half the speed he would have liked to use, but it was safer that way, and he was able to nurse his

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engines for the rapid withdrawal he would have to make if he was successful, or if he was not.

The entry into the control room of his second officer, Barton, broke his train of thought and he turned as the man approached him.

"Plot gives us twelve hours at our present speed, sir," Barton told him.

"Better prepare the landing party," replied Murphy. "Tell them to get six hours sleep and then we'll hold a briefing session in their mess."

"Major Reynolds has already ordered that, sir."

Murphy nodded. Reynolds, the Commando's leader was a good man or Sherman wouldn't have sent him.

"I'm going to turn in myself, Barton. You take over here, and call me at—" he consulted the wall clock, "—six hundred unless anything happens before that. I want to hit the planet from the night side so that we have more time to storm the Rihnan H.Q. before any resistance is forthcoming, and before daylight."

Murphy left the bridge and went below to his cabin. He did not sleep soundly.

Within an hour of his being called he attended the briefing in the Commando's mess room. It was short and to the point for the plan of campaign was comparatively simple. The spaceport was a quarter of a mile from the Rihnan headquarters, and Murphy planned to take control of the spaceport buildings with a mixed party of Commandos and crew members under the command of Lieutenant Barton, while he and Major Reynolds took two main parties and converged on the building from different directions. From the information he had received from the Centaurans Murphy anticipated little opposition at the building itself, but on the way back he expected that the alarm would have been given and at least some forces despatched to head him off. The route back to the ship from the Rihnan H.Q. was to be different from either of the approach routes. Once back at the field the two main parties would embark at once on the ship while the third party covered them from the spaceport buildings, the third party would then withdraw and, all being well they would head for home as fast as they could.

After the briefing was over Murphy went gloomily back to the control room where a junior officer was in charge. Now that the time for action was near he felt distinctly pessimistic about the whole action. Three hundred men against a fully armed planet was a very uneven division of the odds, and when it came down to it he would probably have to rely on the speed and manouvrability of his ship to get safely away.

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He licked his lips, but found that his tongue was too dry to have any effect, and as he analysed his feelings he realised that his pessimism was chiefly due to personal fear for his own safety. On the screen before him Tekrir showed more brightly now, an ever growing spot of light, the blueness of which cast a cold shiver in Murphy's breast as he looked at it.

An hour later they contacted the planet, Tekron, almost dead ahead and a little below the now large globe of the parent star. Another hour and they were sliding slowly down through the atmosphere towards the gleaming lights of the city and its space port. It was roughly three o'clock in the morning local time.

The ship grounded a trifle heavily under the command of the third officer as close to the spacefield buildings as the landing lights would allow, and hardly had she settled to rest before the large cargo doors amidships were thrown open and the first party were racing as hard as the increased gravity would allow them to take over the control of the field.

From the other side of the vessel Major Reynolds' party set off in the opposite direction to approach the Rihnan headquarters from the rear, and Murphy in command of the second party of the striking force drove from the main entrance of the spacefield and out into the main streets of the town.

His party moved in two columns, one on each side of the road, and kept as close to the shelter of the buildings as they could. They made little noise in their soft footwear, and only the chink of equipment and the soft rustle of moving bodies disturbed the night silence. The gravity affected them slightly and before they had gone a hundred yards out of the gates many of them were breathing stertoriously and struggling to get their second wind.

At Murphy's side a young Commando subaltern swore under his breath and whispered, "This blasted gravity will cut our speed when we return, sir. I reckon it'll throw our schedule out at least five minutes."

Murphy grunted in reply. It was true and he wondered with some apprehension if that five minutes might not make all the difference between success and failure. Despite the cool night air he felt his body sticky with perspiration under his light clothes, and his hip ached slightly where his heavy pistol jolted against the soft flesh.

Their route took them straight to the Rihnan H.Q., and although it was barely a quarter of a mile in a straight line the turns in the roads which they were forced to take stretched it to nearly twice that distance. Nevertheless it was precisely four minutes after they left

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the ship that the tall unmistakable bulk rose out of the darkness ahead of them.

They reached the end of the avenue leading directly onto the building and Murphy signalled for the two lines of men to stop and stay close to the shadow of the other buildings until he got word from Reynolds that he was in position to attack. He switched the tiny receiver-transmitter attached to his wrist and waited with ever-mounting impatience for the signal. Reynolds was coming a longer way round and it would be at least another minute before he was in position, that minute seemed like an hour as they crouched in the shadows in deathly silence save for the slight murmur of night sounds around them. Murphy listened hard for any indication that the alarm had been raised, but the almost uncanny silence sent tremors of doubt through his body. They could have walked into a trap. He stirred uneasily.

"Where the hell's Reynolds got to?" he growled in a low voice.

"May have lost his way," said the subaltern helpfully.

Even as his voice died away the set on Murphy's wrist buzzed briefly and Reynolds' voice, high pitched and distorted by the receiver reported, "In position at the rear of the building. Go ahead, Commander."

Murphy breathed a thankful sigh and snapped over the switch.

"Make as little noise as possible. There are no signs of alarm as yet. I will take the ten top stories by elevator, you take the bottom twelve and make sure your men search every room. Confirm, please."

"Message acknowledged," came Reynolds voice, "Over."

Murphy bared his teeth slightly as he snapped the switch over and gave the order, "Rendezvous in the main entrance in ten minutes. Attack now. Go!"

He rose from the shadow of the wall and ran, half crouching, across the open square before the building. He felt icily calm now that the moment had come and his blood ran hotly through his veins as his internal tension relaxed and the excitement of the imminent encounter gripped him. Behind him he was aware of the soft pad of feet and the faint rattle of moving bodies as the men followed him.

He made straight for the great front entrance from which a soft glow of light emanated, disclosing the fact that someone was on duty to prevent unauthorised persons entering. He grinned as he thought of the surprise that was coming to whoever was inside the entrance hall. They went in through the front door in a rush, with Murphy and the subaltern in the lead, and from a large desk in front of them half a dozen startled beings looked up at them. The two groups stood

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dead still for perhaps five seconds, eyeing each other while more of Murphy's men crowded in behind him.

Murphy broke the silence and the tension as he ordered, loudly and harshly, " Elevators, men. The top ten floors. Number three squad hold this hall."

They made for the elevators with a rush, and as they did so the group by the desk unfroze and moved across the hall to intercept them. The commandos took no chances and the six beings died in the lancing blasts of their weapons.

The elevators moved smoothly and quickly to the topmost floors, Murphy and a dozen men took the top storey and the remainder split up into groups to search each floor below that. For the few seconds that they were in the elevator Murphy had time to think about the six beings in the hall below. He had never seen a Rihnan, but he had heard descriptions of them from the Centaurans and from those descriptions he was prepared to swear that the tall, bald headed aliens were members of that fabulous race.

The lift stopped and the party burst from it like a miniature avalanche. Already the activity in the floors below could be heard, and the sounds of conflict had obviously disturbed the occupants of the top storey, for as they left the elevator they encountered another small party of the bald-headed beings. That the alarm had been given was quite clear for one of them immediately opened fire with a small hand weapon and a man at Murphy's side slid silently to the floor. The commandos wasted no time, and the flashing bursts of their weapons cleared the corridor as effectively as a cloth wiping a chalk mark from a board.

Murphy made for the first door over the dead bodies of their opponents. It was locked and he blasted it with his pistol, kicking the wreckage viciously aside with his foot. The room inside was empty, and as he turned to leave a burst of firing from further along the corridor showed that his men had found one that was occupied. With two others at his shoulder he made for another door, and found it unlocked. The room inside was occupied. The Rihnan inside had laid low when the alarm was given, and a blast of fire from behind a large piece of furniture shattered the wall beside them as they entered. Murphy threw himself sideways, his pistol blasting in the direction of the shot, and a body slumped heavily to the floor in one corner. There was an inner room to this apartment but it was unoccupied when they looked in.

The third room Murphy entered was also completely empty and by this time the whole building was resounding to the sounds of battle as the searchers ravaged their way through it. After the first shock

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of surprise it was clear that the occupants were fighting back, and Murphy knew that by this time the whole city must be roused by the racket that was going on. It took him and his party just six minutes to clear the top floor and to realise that Brady was not there. Murphy himself went into the last room and blasted the two Rihnans who were waiting there, then he made his way back at a trot along the broad corridors to the elevators. The rest of his party were already gathering there as he panted up.

"No luck?" he queried.

"No, sir, nothing," returned the N.C.O.

"Casualties?"

"Two dead, sir, and four injured, but all the injured are walking cases."

"Good. Now let's get down to the main hall."

They entered the lift and started it on its downward journey. Three floors down it stopped and another party joined them. The sergeant in charge shook his head in reply to Murphy's question.

"No, sir. Not a thing."

They continued uninterrupted to the ground floor and Murphy was, by now, in an agony of suspense to see if Brady was there waiting for him. When they got to the main entrance hall most of the other parties had already gathered with Reynolds in command waiting for him anxiously. His face was taut and strained as he crossed quickly towards Reynolds.

"Any luck, Reynolds?"

Reynolds shook his head, his lips pursed to a thin line, he said nothing.

"Hell and damnation," snarled Murphy. "He must be here somewhere." He glared round the hall like a caged animal.

"We've been through the whole building, sir," Reynolds told him. "I just had a call from Barton, opposition is hotting up round the field. He suggests we withdraw as soon as possible."

Murphy glanced at his watch. It was just fourteen minutes since the ship landed and his timetable to this point had allowed for fifteen. Clearly there was not time for a further search to be made. He swore again luridly, aware that the rest of the men around him were waiting for a decision, and his mind was made up as one of the party on lookout guard in front of the main entrance came in to report. "There's some opposition moving up the main avenue towards us, sir."

Murphy made up his mind fast. "Well, we'll have to leave here that's all, Reynolds, but we'll grab a couple of prisoners as we go. They may be useful. Make sure its these bald-headed types, though."

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"There's one wounded over by the desk," said Reynolds.

"How bad?"

"Enough to put him out of action, no more."

"That'll do for one."

A burly commando pushed his way forward, saluted, and said, "There will be another on the second floor, sir. I laid one out with the butt of my pistol. I don't think he's dead."

"Take another man and grab him quick," snapped Murphy. "Then we'll get out of here fast."

A minute later the man and his companion returned bearing the inert body of the Rihnan with them.

"Right," said Murphy grimly. "Now all we have to do is get back. We'll stick in one main party with an advance guard of about twenty."

"Groups ten and eleven," ordered Reynolds harshly. "Advance guard."

From outside there came sounds of firing indicating that the lookout party were engaging an attacking force of the enemy, and the advance guard left at the double.

Murphy elbowed his way through the crowds of commandos and crewmen who thronged the hall with Reynolds at his back, and together they ran down the steps of the building and out into the blackness of the night. They swung left along a wide thoroughfare in accordance with their pre-arranged plan, and ahead of them, dark shadows moving silently against the walls of the buildings, went the advance guard.

"On the double," ordered Murphy quietly, and heard the word going back through the ranks. He moved quickly and quietly, as quietly as he could, not that there seemed to be any reason for silence, the whole city behind seemed to be waking to the tumult that had been centred around the Rihnan H.Q.

And there had been no sign of Brady. As he moved along with half his being concentrated on the watch for danger Murphy was aware of a tight knot of disappointment in the pit of his stomach. He had, he realised, been unutterably certain that Brady would be on the planet and in that building. He had no thought of failure since conceiving the plan, until it stared him in the face. He turned the facts over in his mind as he ran, his eyes seeking for signs of opposition to their rapid progress. Ahead of them the advance guard moved without hesitation along the way they had to go. All it could mean was that Brady was not there, and possibly he had never been there. It had been all supposition on Murphy's part and he had been wrong, so very wrong. He did not think that Sherman would be very pleased.

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A sudden burst of firing ahead drew his attention and he could see the bright flashes of combat as the advance guard met the fire of an unseen enemy.

A narrower avenue opened up to one side of them, just a dark entrance in the blur of the buildings, and Murphy made his decision instantly.

"Reynolds, send an advance party down there, and get a message for the others to retreat and join up in the rear. We'll take this road and make a detour."

The new guard went off ahead of them and the running shadows of the other party followed them as they moved, faster now, along the new route. Through a gap in the buildings Murphy could see bright, irregular flashes against the sky. "That'll be the field," he said to Reynolds. "Looks like they're having trouble as well."

"It'll serve as a guide, sir," replied Reynolds, panting heavily as he spoke.

The advance guard had seen the flashes too, for they turned in the direction from which the lights came, and in two hundred yards or so they turned right again. The flashes were dead ahead now, and the rumble of heavy firing sounded suddenly close at hand. The main entrance to the field loomed out of the darkness ahead of them, illuminated by the light of combat, and Murphy tightened his lips as he saw that the fire was being directed at the spaceport buildings and was heavy enough to show that there was a fair sized attacking force. The advance guard had stopped and were not attempting to engage the enemy from the rear until the main party came up to them. Murphy made a mental note to recommend the leader of the party for an award of some kind, he had led his group with considerable skill and intelligence.

A messenger came out of the darkness before them as they slowed to a walk.

"Big force ahead, about a hundred yards, sir. Reckon we'll have to cut our way through."

"Do they know we're about."

"No, sir."

"Right. Reynolds," he turned to the major. "We'll go in fast and catch them before they know what's hit them. All forces will make straight for the ship and as soon as the last man is aboard we'll pull in Barton's party and take off. And make sure those two prisoners are looked after safely."

Reynolds nodded and passed instructions back to the crouching groups.

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Murphy gave them a minute and then rose from his crouching position and led the way silently towards the flashing lines of fire. The advance party closed in behind and he gave the silent signal for them all to advance at the double. His pistol at the ready and his eyes alert for any sign of attack he moved rapidly along the darkened avenue. It seemed for a moment as if the firing was so far away that they would be hours before they reached it and in the next moment they were on top of it. Murphy saw the first group of aliens crouching beside a large field piece mounted at the side of the road, and without stopping in his stride he pumped a half a dozen rounds into them, watching dispassionately as they crumpled and fell.

He was aware that around him the others were firing too, and that it was being returned, and heavily. A bolt whistled over his head from a concealed point in the entrance to a building and he ducked quickly, swivelling on his heels and returning the fire heavily until a figure pitched from the entrance to sprawl across the pavement. The men around him were shouting now and cheering, and he led the main rush across the wide road to the spaceport entrance; as they moved they seemed to be running a gauntlet of fire from all sides and two men fell beside Murphy as he ran, crouching and zigzagging towards the entrance. Covering fire from the field whistled over him and a blast from the enemy scorched the ground bare inches before him. Then he was through, and the entrance to the field engulfed him, shutting out the firing.

Murphy paused and turned to wait for the rest of the party as they came up to him in small groups, he waved them on urgently towards the ship as it lay, bulking huge in the middle of the field, a haven which might not be so safe as it appeared. Reynolds came up to him, staggering slightly and clutching one arm which hung limply at his side.

" Bad ?" asked Murphy.

" I'll manage," was the reply.

" All right, get off to the ship. I'll see to the rest of them."

And still they came through the firing, in smaller groups now, in ones and twos, carrying the wounded with them, and making slow time across the smoothness of the field, but the last of them soon disappeared inside the gleaming square of light which marked the starboard cargo hatch. Murphy gave them another minute but no more appeared. He flicked the switch on his transmitter and called Barton in the spaceport buildings.

" Time for you to clear out, Barton," he told him.

" Right, sir," responded Barton. " It's getting a bit hot up here. I have planted a demolition charge at the main entrance to cover our withdrawal. I'll use it as soon as we have left the building."

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"Good man," said Murphy. "Now, I'm going aboard. Hurry yourself up, we want to be out of here as soon as we can."

"Right away," came the answer.

Murphy ran and turned across the field towards the ship. At the entrance he turned and made out the running figures of Barton's party as they streamed from the buildings and made for the ship, running hard. As the first men streamed panting through the cargo hatch a brilliant burst of fire spewed up and outwards over the great entrance, lighting up the whole wierd scene for miles around. The thundering roar of the explosion burst painfully on Murphy's ears as he turned inside the ship and made his way rapidly up to the control room. As he reached it and switched on the intercom unit he caught Barton reporting from the cargo hatch. "Commander Murphy, Barton here. Answer please."

"Go ahead, Barton."

"All my party are aboard, sir, and the cargo hatch is sealed."

"Right. All hands from control. Stand by for emergency takeoff."

Already the preliminary blasts of the attackers were breaking around the ship, and he switched power into the engines and heard the whine of the generators. Beneath him the ship stirred and grumbled, the scene before him began to move and fall away, the lights were smaller now and the flashes not so bright and he took her up and away from the turmoil which he had caused, and out into the star-strewn darkness of the alien night with the heavens opening out before them. In his heart was a deep, sick, void, partly from reaction but mainly because Brady was not with him on the control bridge.

XV.

Brady had a lot to think about during the days following his examination by the Rihnan President. For one thing he felt sure that there would be other examinations, but a casual enquiry from the Rihnan who brought his meals elicited the fact that the President had returned whence he had come. Brady gave thanks for small mercies.

He was thankful, too, that he had been able to bluff his way through as he had done, and he was more than a little worried about the information he had gained after the examination. He could not imagine the Terran forces resting for long on their laurels, and once they did attempt further conquests it seemed likely that the Rihnan President's appraisal of the situation would be correct.

Also, there was the mystery of the being with the peculiar antennae, and the more he thought about it the more he was convinced that it

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was part of an attempt to rescue him. He estimated that if that were so then any rescue bid based upon the disguised human's reports would be made fairly soon, and he would be able to give a full report to Sherman before any major operations were begun. But the days passed and there was no sign of any such bid.

Twenty days after his last contact with the being, and two weeks after his meeting with the President, Brady decided that he could not wait much longer, for with their resources it would not take the Rihnans very long to fit out their fleets with the devices that the President had outlined to his colleagues. He did not know how long it would take him to contact Sherman if he did get off the planet, and that made every extra day he was held captive of increasingly greater importance. If rescue did not come to him, then he would have to escape.

The problem of how to do it was something quite different again. Obviously, any plan he decided upon would have to be based on the spacefield, and on the prospects of getting a small ship he would be capable of handling alone. Such a ship was liable to be vulnerable to attack, especially by a full-size cruiser, and he would have to rely on the element of surprise to take him far enough away from the planet before any pursuit was started.

The key, he realised, lay in his daily walks, and subtly, in pursuance of his plans, he began to direct his outings in the direction of the field. He did not try to go very near it at first, but each day, following a slightly different route, he edged closer to it. By now his two escorts were thoroughly bored with the whole routine of the exercise periods, and Brady knew that it was this factor alone which gave him any chance of success. Had he tried it in the beginning he would have been sharply turned away from the field and directed to other districts of the city. As it was, his carefully arranged deviations met with no comment, and a week after he had begun them he strolled openly and unchecked past the main entrance to the field.

On his way back to the Rihnan H.Q. after that first sally Brady breathed a deep sigh of relief as the first step was accomplished with no difficulty. Already during that week he had worked on the next stages of the problem. He noted that from the outside of the space-field entrance he could get a good view of most of the field and the ships which were using it. Some were familiar, others quite strange, but nearly all of them suffered the one defect—they were all too large. He had to be careful now to see that he did not go past the spaceport too frequently, and thus give his guards an inkling of what he intended doing, and because of this factor he could not be sure that he was going to choose a day when a suitable craft would be using the field. Neither could he be too particular about the type of craft he was to

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steal, and his main fear was that having taken steps to dispose of his guards he would find that the ship on which he had decided was either unready for flight or was unsuitable for a one-man crew. He had already decided how to put his guards our of action, or at least how to try.

On his fourth stroll past the field he spotted a small planetary craft lying half hidden behind the bulk of a larger vessel. He knew the type of craft to which she belonged, and he knew that her power sources gave her a large stellar range, but it was her other supplies which gave him most cause for doubt. Probably she had oxygen for six or seven days, but food and water would be limited to bare emergency supplies; that was a risk which he would have to take.

He reached out gently with his mind, probing the minds of his two guards. They were communicating with one another on minor personal matters in a bored, lazy way which showed that they were quite off guard, and he stopped still in the middle of the pathway and launched a blinding blast of thought control at them, much as he had done against the original three who had interrogated him. It was not quite so strong as previously for his aim was to control them until such time as he could dispose of them quietly rather than to have them fall unconscious at his feet. It was a ticklish moment for he had not been able to experiment with the various degrees of mental power which he knew to be at his command, but it was instantly successful.

Brady could feel the terror in their minds as they struggled to free themselves, but he held them with hypnotic intensity as he forced them to do his will. He turned to look at them as they stood rigidly behind him, and he could see their torment written in the wide horror-stricken eyes as they fought to break his control. He made them follow him in through the entrance to the field and as they sensed his intention it was all he could do to keep control of them. The sweat poured down his face with the intensity of his effort, and the muscles all over his body were taut with strain as he strove to retain the mastery he had won.

Fortunately there were no other Rihnans about and no other being in sight paid them sufficient attention to question what was going on. Brady took them slowly across towards the tiny cruiser, moving casually and inconspicuously though every fibre of his being told him to run and take off as quickly as possible. He reached the ship at last and found that the larger bulk of the other ship shielded them from the view of the rest of the field. It could not have been better for his purposes and his heart soared as he suddenly began to feel that luck was with him in his venture.

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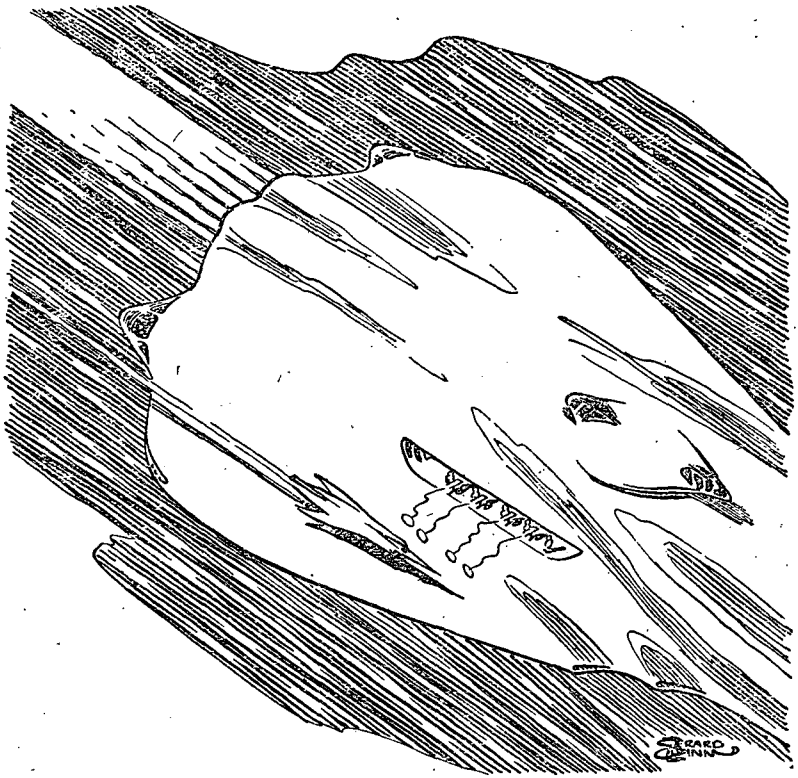

He released his hold on the two guards for an instant, and then, before they could recover completely, he hit them again with the full force of his mind just as he had done previously to the other three. The strain was terrific and he felt lances of pain shoot through his eyes with the intensity of his concentration.

It did not last long, no more than five seconds, and in that time he felt their minds scream and die beneath the fury of his attack. Then his focussed gaze rested on their limp bodies lying in crumpled heaps before him, and still there was no one to interrupt him.

Brady turned for the entrance to the small cruiser, wiping the sweat from his forehead as he did so, he climbed through the already open hatch and passed into the roomy control turret. There were seats for two persons and he had a momentary twinge of panic as he prayed

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that it did not mean that the craft was dual-controlled. His eyes wandered over the switches and dials, noting their strange markings, but he felt reasonably confident from their relative positions that he could define the working of the controls. Hurriedly he traced the feed lines from the fuel tanks to the meters and the needle convinced him that they were full, so too were the oxygen tanks.

He went outside once more to have a hurried look round. The two Rihnans lay as he had left them. The main entrance to the larger ship was open, and he felt reasonably certain that there would be someone working aboard it, certainly he was in no position to take further chances for the sake of a few extra provisions. He turned back to the small cruiser and climbed in once more, closing and locking the hatch behind him. Rapidly he strapped himself into the control seat, and tentatively switched power to the engines. The dull rumble from behind him told that he had done the right thing.

Slowly he moved the vessel from her position close in to the field buildings, and eased her into a better position for takeoff, all the time his eyes ranged the area for signs that someone had spotted his illegal movement of the ship. Nothing happened.

Brady's lips were compressed almost to the point of invisibility as he shifted the control lever and turned more power to the engines. The ship moved slowly off the ground, gathering speed and height as she went, and he could feel the power throbbing behind him as she rose.

From her early movements he judged her to be faster and more manoeuvrable than the average ship of her class, and he knew that he was lucky to have found her. He made a reasonably correct assessment of her value in speed and range, but even so he had doubts about her ability to carry him all the way back to Meron on her present resources, even if he knew the way. In an attempt to confuse any pursuit he levelled off at about two thousand feet and flew for some three thousand miles round the curve of the planet into the night side before turning upwards and outwards towards the star-flecked skies. He tried to recall the position of the planet relative to its parent sun when he arrived all those weeks ago, and he coupled this with the distance which he estimated it would have travelled round its orbit during the intervening time.

It was rough working, but in the end he thought that he had a good idea of the direction from which his captors ship had arrived. That at least told him from which sector of space they had come, always presuming that they had not taken a devious route to confuse him or anyone who might happen to be following.

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He was well outside the atmosphere now and he set a course for what he hoped was the correct direction. The ship was fast and handy, and he hoped that its size would prevent easy detection if, by now, any pursuit had begun. The depths of the Galaxy stretched away endlessly before him, and when he turned he could make out the slowly shrinking disc of Tekron, with the parent sun blazing brilliantly behind it. Brady shuddered slightly as the loneliness of his position was thrust upon him. The tiny cabin with the endless depths outside gave him a slight feeling of claustrophobia which he had to fight down with strong determination, for Man was not yet used to having the depths of space as his playground and it was rather terrifying to be alone.

Away to the left, ahead and below him as he looked, he could make out the tiny dot that was the next planet out from Tekron, he had no knowledge of it and no time to gather any. He laughed a trifle grimly at the mild joke and the sound echoed strangely in the tiny cabin. In an hour he was level with it, and then it was falling behind him just as Tekron had before it.

A flicker on the screen drew his attention at that moment, and he turned to see what was causing it. Whatever it was showed clearly on the silver background, and it was coming from behind, and quickly. His face hardened as he took in the story that was told by that tiny flicker of red light. His escape had been discovered and the vessel behind him was the hunting party sent to get him back. Had he detected it a few minutes earlier he could have turned and fled for the shelter of the planet he had just passed. There he might have stood a chance of losing them and stealing another ship when the hue and cry had died down. But it was far too late for that now.

Frantically he searched space ahead and to the side to see if any other possible shelter offered itself, and to help him he turned on a small search beam and lanced it out ahead to assist his own vision. It was now that he could do with the detecting equipment of a first-line cruiser—and the armament as well.

His eyes caught a flash of light ahead and to starboard, and for an instant he thought it was a star. He concentrated on it, and turned the search beam in its direction hoping that it would be the planet he was looking for. On the screen the pursuing craft showed more plainly now, and Brady knew that it would be in shooting distance before long. Eagerly his eyes swept space ahead and in the direction of the flash of light—and then it showed on the search beam indicator. It could be nothing else but a planet, and from its light, now dully visible, a small one. He turned the ship slowly until the planet showed dead ahead, and desperately fed more power into the engines. He

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heard the generators whine shrilly in protest at the extra load they were being forced to carry, but every mile of speed counted now, and he watched the outline of the planet ahead grow, shining dimly by the reflected light of its star.

It was too late now to wonder about air and water or food, it was a haven which might hold his death, but at least it was a chance he would not have if he stuck to the small vessel and tried to outfly the pursuers at the back of him.

At least it had an atmosphere, that much became clear as he neared it and saw the tenuous, halo-like luminescence which surrounded it, and he thanked his stars for small mercies. He tried to gauge its distance from the parent star and realised that the prospects of its being inhabited were slight for it was likely to be arctic in all but the equatorial regions. The gravity too would be less than that of Tekron, and the atmosphere almost certainly thinner.

The pursuing ship was nearer now, but as the globe opened up in front of him he aimed the tiny craft to strike its atmosphere at a tangent as near to the equator as possible, with the hope that he might lose his pursuers for a short time as he banked around the curve of the small world. If he could manage to land in some wild and rugged part and sieze a ten- or fifteen-minute advantage to get away from the small vessel, then he would have a fighting chance of avoiding capture. What happened after that he did not dare contemplate at this stage.

He locked the controls for a minute while he hurried to the emergency food store at the back of the control room and rapidly stuffed his pockets with a selection of the small bundles he found there, then he slid back into his seat and took the ship down fast into the atmosphere

There was no cloud and he could see the surface swinging below him through the slight atmospheric haze, and then he lost the other ship around the curve of the small globe. Rapidly he cut his speed knowing that it would cost him little time, for the pursuers would be forced to slow even more than his own handy craft in order to follow him round. He passed into the night side of the planet and skimmed the surface at a bare thousand feet striving to make out details of the world beneath, and thankful for the light of the one tiny satellite that illuminated, if faintly, the main details of the land. It looked flat and bare and rugged, but he made out the gentle, gleaming curve of a river away to the left. He turned for it, knowing that water would be valuable in the near future, and coaxed the ship down on to a smooth plain some two miles wide that lay between the river and a mountainous strip of country in whose ruggedness lay his best chance of escape.

He tore open the hatch and dashed for the hills without stopping for any further examination, at any minute the other vessel might

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appear over the horizon and if they caught him out here in the open it would be the end. The air was thin and cold and even after running a dozen paces he was panting madly. Fast moving was aided by the lack of gravity but the lack of oxygen offset that advantage. Despite his exertion he was soon shivering and his heart was thumping madly beneath his ribs.

It took him six minutes to reach the shelter of the foothills and he paused for a moment to get his breath before starting to climb the gentle, rock-strewn gradient that led to safer heights. He heard the roar of the approaching vessel long before he could see it, and he thanked the rarified atmosphere for relaying the message so quickly. He found a large boulder and lay down behind it to await events.

His pursuers were in a full-sized battle-cruiser of a type that he knew well, and they cruised slowly across the plain from end to end before turning and flying low over the spot where his own craft lay. He guessed the ship to be of Tekronian origin, but he knew very well that in a matter like this it would be commanded, if not manned entirely, by Rihnans; at any event there were sure to be a number of Rihnans aboard. They crossed and recrossed the area several times before slowing and hovering almost stationary over the spot where he had landed barely ten minutes before.

Brady frowned slightly as he saw the manoeuvre and wondered, with sudden uneasiness what was going on, then as he watched a smaller vessel detached itself from the main hull and coasted gently down to land about a hundred yards from his own vessel. He counted a dozen as its occupants climbed out, and watched closely as they moved to search his craft. He could make out no details in the pale light of the small moon, they were only figures moving on the black and grey background of the plain, and he guessed that all of them were suited against the climate. It did not take them long to effect the search and they withdrew again to their own vessel.

Brady was puzzled for a moment, but any doubts he had about their intentions were swiftly removed as a short, sharp explosion split the silence and he saw a white ball of flame envelope his ship. He had to shield his eyes from the glare, his heart sick and tired within him, for he knew all too well what the action meant. The world he was on was quite uninhabited, and the Rihnans knew that with his ship gone there was no possibility of his being able to leave without first surrendering to them.

The glare faded quickly and when he raised his eyes to look upon the scene once more there was only a glowing, smoking pile of wreckage where before had rested the trim, neat shape of his stolen ship. He

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wondered if the original owner would get any form of compensation, but the smile on his lips as he thought about it was grim rather than humorous. He shivered violently and pulled his clothing tighter about his body, praying both for the dawn and the departure of his enemies, though by their movements they seemed in no hurry to leave.

After watching his ship burn out they began to walk off in the opposite direction, towards the river, fanning out in a wide semi-circle as they did so until they formed a line about fifty yards apart. Brady followed them as far as he could but despite the light from the satellite he soon lost them in the dimness. The significance of the move was not lost on Brady, and he gave the Rihnan commander grudging approval of his action. He was no fool, he knew that Brady would have to move towards water sooner or later, and he must have guessed that Brady would take to the hills where cover was plentiful and where a single man might elude a search party indefinitely if he were quick-moving and determined, so he was putting a screen between the hills and the river to stop Brady getting water supplies. There would be no need for him to waste time searching the countryside when, by waiting a few days, he could force Brady to surrender or to die.

It was clear too that the Rihnans knew the area in which he had landed, and their actions told him that the river he had chosen was probably the only source of water for hundreds of miles. The condition of the planet made that seem very likely.

So, he was trapped. Brady lay huddled in his clothes, cold and weary for several hours until the rising blueness of Tekrir brought light to the scene and some warmth to unfreeze his stiffened bones. He moved warily in the shelter of the boulder knowing well that with the dawn a hundred pairs of eyes and detectors would be searching the area for any movement. He stood up, stretched and stamped around to restore the circulation to his limbs, and then ate a frugal meal from his few stores. Without water to wash it down the food was dry and unwholesome, but it served to fill the aching void in his stomach and to restore life to his tired muscles, then he lay down again and dropped into a restless sleep under the blue warmth from the alien star.

It was late afternoon when he finally awoke to a dull roaring overhead and as he blinked and looked out from the shelter of his rock he saw another small auxiliary cruiser flying low above him to disappear over the hills at the back of him. His lips tightened as he saw it, for it was obviously a move to cut off any retreat he made in that direction. He lay and brooded over it for some time, watching the sun go down over the horizon and dreading the ensuing night with its cold that would seep into his body and freeze the marrow in his bones.

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The night passed slowly and he spent some of the time moving cautiously along the side of the hills, trying to keep parallel with the direction of the river in the hope that he might come out near it and well away from the Rihnans watching the stretch opposite him.

He covered over a mile before the tiny moon rose over the horizon and made further movement unwise, so he found a slight dip in the ground, sheltered by an overhanging rock, in which he slumped thankfully, for the movements of the last hour had sapped his strength badly in the thin air.

By morning he was stiff and only semi-conscious, and he knew that he would be in no fit state to spend another night in the open. His mouth was dry and his lips slightly cracked, the back of his throat was continually contracting in an effort to force moisture from his starved glands, and it was with only great difficulty that he managed to force down a few mouthfuls of food.

He thought about his position a lot during the day in between the restless dozes from which he seemed to awaken even more tired than before he slept, and he decided to try and hold out until the next morning, then, if they had not gone, he would have to acknowledge defeat and surrender to them in the hope that he might get another chance to escape. The prospects were not at all encouraging.

Brady was asleep when, early in the evening, sudden activity sprang up among the watchers by the river. The roar of the second craft overhead awakened Brady, and he blinked as he took in the details of the activity that was going on a mile to his left. He watched the guards along the river as they hurried to their scout ship to rejoin the parent vessel hovering above. With both its auxiliaries stowed away it swung quickly upwards and outwards, and he guessed from the angle of its ascent that it was in a hurry to gain height. Hardly had it begun to move than he saw the faint aura of its protective screens envelope its squat hull; that it was expecting trouble at any minute was obvious, but from where? And from whom?

And then he saw the other ship. It came howling down out of the heavens, and swept viciously over the top of the rising Tekron cruiser, passing close above it in a daredevil sweep which sent the cruiser into a tight loop to avoid a collision. White blasts of atomic force licked across the short intervening space and caught the Tekronian vessel at the top of its turn, it swung and hung for a minute, striving to regain its shattered equilibrium while its own armament hit back at the attacker. The other ship turned in a wide curve astern of its victim and loosed another shattering blast which licked consumingly around the almost stationary hull, and Brady read the message of the blasts which ripped aside the Tekronians protective screens as if they did not exist. The

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wild, unbelieving hope in his breast was only dulled by the strange markings on the newcomer, and the fact that no one knew where he was.

From five thousand feet the Tekron ship plunged straight down in a dive which could only mean destruction, hitting the ground behind a low ridge on the other side of the river, the billowing cloud of its funeral pyre rising with the explosion which was its requiem.

Brady stood and looked on the scene with amazed eyes and senses battered by the force of that final explosion, and as he looked up, he saw the other ship turning slowly above the column of smoke, warily making sure that there would be no further danger before gliding at last for a landing on the plain before him.

XVI.

Brady stayed close under the shadow of the boulder keenly watching the landing through slightly squinted eyes. That he was puzzled was obvious from the frown on his forehead, for he could conceive of no possible means by which any would-be rescuer would know of his whereabouts.

He thought back to the stranger with the antennae on Tekron, but even that being knowing of Brady's escape, would hardly be aware of the other circumstances which had befallen him. Brady realised that he was still, subconsciously, looking on that being as a human, which was ridiculous, for he had nothing on which to base his premise.

The ship landed heavily, a trifle too heavily, and Brady's lips tightened as he watched the manoeuvre. Perhaps she had been damaged in the short encounter with the Tekron vessel; admittedly she had her screens up when she attacked for he had seen the hazy glow of them as she dived above him. Had she been an Earth ship then her screens would almost certainly have protected her from any harm, and that was another theory that crumbled under examination.

The paradoxes of the whole situation were far too involved for Brady at the moment, and he fell back on the old maxim 'if in doubt sweat it out.' For the time being he would stay under the shelter of the boulder and see what happened.

Already the midship hatch had been opened and groups of uniformed figures were descending, although it was too far away for him to make out any details. They might be humans and they might not, they had the right number of limbs, but the distortion of their clothes acted as first-rate camouflage over a distance of almost a mile. They fanned out in several directions, some of them inspecting the blackened wreckage of Brady's own craft and another party marching off towards the river with the obvious intention of looking over the wreckage of their late opponents' vessel.

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Brady chewed his lips with indecision. He could take a chance and give himself up, at least there would be food and water for him, or he could stay where he was and die of thirst. The thought of water brought with it a torment such as he had not imagined possible and his tongue ran enquiringly round his cracked lips while his throat contracted with the agony of his thoughts. The deciding factor was when he suddenly realised that whatever the people were in that ship they were the enemies of the Rihnans.

During his meditations he had not paid complete attention to what was going on around the newly landed vessel, and consequently he did not see the erection of a large loudspeaker just outside the open hatch. He jumped a foot as a giant, rumbling voice called, "Captain Brady, this is Murphy. If you are in hearing range please show yourself." The stentorian tones resounded around the hills and echoed in fantastic waves above and below him as Brady stood transfixed and utterly bewildered by the unexpectedness of it.

There was a pause of nearly a minute, and then the message was repeated with the loud-hailer pointing in a slightly different direction. Brady's mind was a whirl of amazed speculation as he heard the message for the second time. It was quite inconceivable that any Terran ship should know where he was, especially when one thought of the unexpected moves that he had made during the past few days.

A third time the message boomed out, and this time an urgent afterthought was added as the speaker said "Please hurry, if you can hear us, Captain Brady. We are expecting Rihnan visitors before long."

Brady set his lips tight. It might be a trap but for the life of him he could not see how. With sudden decision he straightened and moved out of the shadow of the rock, walking slowly and warily towards the foot of the hills, alert for any sign of danger. He had not gone ten yards before a rumble of comment from the group around the hailer echoed over it, and then a voice called joyously, "Hey, skipper, hurry it up, will you." There was no mistaking Murphy's boisterous welcome.

Brady grinned suddenly at the sound, a wave of emotion spreading over and through him bringing tears to the corners of his eyes. There was elation in his breast as he moved into a gentle stumbling trot, and already he could feel the clasp of Murphy's hand and see before him his colleagues' smiling face.

Figures were running towards him from the side of the ship and as they came nearer he searched eagerly, and still a little suspiciously, for signs that they were really human. From fifty yards he could recognise Murphy's hurrying figure way out in front of the others,

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and then they were together. Murphy crushed his hand in a vice-like grasp, his face showing a pleasure which was at once pleasing and embarrassing.

"Skipper," he panted, "I never thought we'd find you. Lord, I can't believe it."

"Me, neither," Brady's face was all smiles. "How did you manage it?"

"Later," the smile died a little on Murphy's face, "We've got to get out of here before they start looking for that ship of theirs."

Unconsciously Brady reached out to see what was troubling Murphy, and in the second that his mind searched he could see the genuineness of Murphy's greeting and the emotions he felt at finding him. It was like reading a private diary and Brady hastily stopped looking, his face reddening slightly with embarrassment. He felt slightly disgusted with himself for taking advantage of his friend under such circumstances, and decided that he must not use his new powers again except under exceptional circumstances.

Murphy was chattering excitedly beside him as they moved hurriedly back towards the ship, but Brady was taking little interest until he realised that Murphy had said something about "starboard-after-screen unit damaged."

"What?" he burst out. "Damaged? How badly?"

"Not good," replied Murphy. "A circuit blowout happened right at the vital moment and one of the Rihnan blasts got through and hit the starboard power generators. It'll mean setting down somewhere for repairs as soon as we can after getting off this darned planet."

"Any idea how long it'll take?"

Murphy shook his head. "I'll get a full report when we get back aboard. They're looking at it now."

"Any casualties?" Brady was suddenly worried in case his rescue had cost the lives of any of the men who were engaged in it, but to his relief Murphy shook his head.

"Two injured by the screen failure, that's all." Murphy's reply was deliberately ambiguous, he didn't want to tell Brady of the casualties on Tekron until he was recovered from his experiences.

They reached and circled the charred wreck of Brady's little flyer and as they moved nearer to the looming bulk of the larger vessel members of the crew began to call greetings to Brady and wave cheerily to him. He felt another upsurge of emotion as he saw the pleased smiles on their faces and recognised old shipmates among them whom he readily acknowledged, but he kept careful rein on his mind as he did so.

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The news that the ship had been damaged in the recent action disturbed him as he thought of the valuable information he had for Admiral Sherman, but he decided to say nothing about it until Murphy had seen what the damage actually was. The knowledge that Brady had such information might make him risk the ship and the crew unnecessarily and Brady did not want that to happen.

They went in through the open hatch and Brady was welcomed by the smiling face of Barton the second officer.

" Glad to have you aboard, sir."

Brady shook hands warmly. " Glad to be aboard, Mister Barton."

" Come down to my cabin and clean up, sir," said Murphy. " We can have a quiet chat there."

Brady ran a hand over the three-day growth on his chin, suddenly aware that he felt exceedingly dirty and scruffy.

" Yes, I guess I do need a bath at that."

In five minutes he was soaking in a hot bath with his fourth glass of cold water in his hands sipping it appreciatively and telling Murphy, " I don't care if it is bad to drink cold water in a hot bath, it's heaven at the moment."

Murphy shrugged and smiled at him from the doorway. Outside the intercom unit on his desk buzzed and he excused himself to answer it, returning a minute later, his face grave and a frown lining his forehead.

" Bad ?" queried Brady.

" Chief engineer says it'll take four days at least to repair the power generator to fifty percent efficiency."

Brady frowned. " At that it'll cut your speed by a quarter."

" At least," agreed Murphy. " And we daren't try getting through this section of space at other than maximum efficiency."

" How long will complete repairs take ?"

" Chief says ten days."

Brady frowned. Ten days was a long time, maybe too long, but it was better that they get home late, than that they should not get home at all.

" At least by that time the hue and cry will have died down a bit."

" Could be," agreed Murphy. " But where do we hide out in the meantime ?"

" Why not use this planet's satellite ?" asked Brady.

" What ?" Murphy's voice was incredulous. " But—" he broke off as though speechless with horror.

" Could do worse," pointed out Brady, using a large cake of soap with almost indecent relish. " Uninhabited, low gravity. Why, it's so close that no one would think of looking there. You could find a

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small, quiet valley and camp down for a month if necessary without anyone finding you."

There were arguments in favour of it, Murphy realised, and he'd had experience of Brady's hair-brained schemes before.

"It might work at that."

"It'll be as good as anywhere else. If you try to get out of the system they'll be on to you like a bag of fleas."

Murphy nodded. "Guess you're right, sir. I'll signal recall, we should be able to take off in an hour."

He went out to his cabin and Brady heard him giving orders over the intercom. He came back a few seconds later and resumed his earlier pose against the edge of the door.

"Murphy," Brady eyed him questioningly. "How did you know where to find me?"

Murphy laughed, "Believe it or not but we missed you by less than thirty-six hours on Tekron. We pulled a raid on the Rihnan H.Q. and found you'd skipped, but we got a couple of prisoners, Rihnans, and they talked—under pressure. They'd got some news of what had happened direct from that ship we destroyed, so of course they were able to tell us exactly where you were."

"You knew they could pull that mind-reading act?"

"No, they told us within two seconds of the start of our interview. I was going to use a translator, but it wasn't necessary." Murphy smiled reminiscently. "Saved us quite a bit of time, too."

Something in his tone made Brady ask, "Why?"

"Well, with the translator we couldn't be sure whether they were telling the truth, but the other way they could see in my mind exactly what would happen to them if they didn't talk or if they didn't tell the truth. I had some pretty nasty ideas cooked up to use on them if need be."

Brady went on soaping himself. He could not trust himself to speak for he knew what the depths of Murphy's feeling for him must be if he could convince the Rihnans of the genuineness of his threats. The fact that he was prepared to go to any lengths to obtain his former C.O.'s freedom was the greatest compliment he could have paid Brady.

"Anyway," went on Murphy, "as soon as we had the story we headed here as fast as we could, just in time to catch them on the hop."

"Funny they never knew about that raid."

"Probably they did, but figured we couldn't possibly know where you were or what was happening."

Brady grinned wryly. "It's a pity I didn't hang around for you a bit longer, it would have saved a lot of trouble."

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"You can say that again."

"I thought that some attempt at rescue might be made, but I couldn't for the life of me see how you were going to find out where I was."

Murphy shrugged. "Bit of information on that recording we were taking when you were captured, plus a bit of good figuring and a lot of luck."

"Yes," nodded Brady, lying back to soak full length in the deep soapy water. "Anyway I'm grateful. Incidentally I spotted your man." He looked quickly at Murphy to see his reaction and was surprised and a trifle disappointed to see the look of puzzled surprise that crept over his face.

"Our man? I don't understand, sir?"

Brady felt the conversation had fallen flat, but he kept to the subject. "Yes, I spotted a fellow in a grey beard with some antennae sprouting from his head. I figured him for an Earthman come to spy out the land."

Murphy shook his head positively. "No, you must have been mistaken, we didn't arrange anything like that. What made you think he was a disguised Terran?"

Brady thought of the contact he had with that being's mind and he saw a parody of explanation as he tried to tell Murphy just why. No, it would have to wait.

He laughed and said, "Oh, I guess I was just looking for any way out I could see and that seemed the most likely. I was wrong."

Murphy smiled. "I suppose you'd like a good long sleep after this wouldn't you, sir?"

"I could sleep for a week."

"We'll be blasting off in less than an hour. You can have my cabin and I'll move in with Barton. You can sleep as long as you like."

Brady smiled his gratitude. "Thanks, Murphy. If there's anything I can do—"

"I'll tell you, sir." Murphy grinned and went out.

Ten minutes later Brady was in between the soft covers of Murphy's bunk and inside another minute he was fast asleep.

XVII.

Brady knew nothing of the ship's limping take-off from the planet, nor of her equally unsteady landing half an hour later in a small valley on the dark side of the tiny satellite. It was not even a valley at that, it was a great rocky gash in the surface of the tiny globe, and it had

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a bare minimum of surface for the ship to land on, and precipitious sides which made any thought of getting out, except by use of a ship, absolutely impossible.

Murphy was extremely dubious about using it, but he realised that it was better than using an open plain or a more accessible valley from which they would be much more likely to be seen by any searchers. He was, even so, most apprehensive about their chances of coming out of the business in one piece, although he agreed with Brady that the damage to the ship was probably unknown to the Rihnans, and as a result they would be looking farther afield for their prey. By the time repairs had been completed it was possible that the hue and cry would have died down and they would be able to make a run for it and be out of the area before anyone was any the wiser.

The one satisfying feature about the operation from Murphy's point of view, was the fact that they had found Brady. After all the trouble Sherman had gone to in arranging the expedition, possibly against his better judgment, it would have been mortifying to return empty-handed.

With the ship safely snugged down and a start made on the repairs, Murphy found time to slip down to his cabin and see how Brady was. He had been sleeping for nearly ten hours, and Murphy was glad that the take-off and landing had not disturbed him for he was obviously in a bad way when he came aboard.

Brady was awake when he opened the cabin door, and was looking out of the view port at the grim and forbidding scenery outside. He turned his head as Murphy came in.

"Sleep well, sir?"

"Feel a new man," smiled Brady.

"Fine, I'm having a meal served down here for both of us. I thought you might like a chat."

"I'd like that."

"I've had a fresh change of clothes put out for you," Murphy pointed to a chair beside the bunk. "I'll tell the orderly to serve in fifteen minutes, sir."

Fifteen minutes later they were sitting down to the first real Terran food Brady had seen in weeks, and his pleasure was so obvious that Murphy had to conceal a smile at the eagerness with which he attacked it.

After a few mouthfuls, Brady asked, "How are the repairs going?"

"The Chief's got the generators stripped down," returned Murphy. "But it's going to be a long job."

"No chance of jury rigging?"

"Not now, he's already started on fabricating new parts from the old ones that are broken down."

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" Good," said Brady swallowing another mouthful and washing it down with a drink. " I didn't want to tell you before because you'd have wanted to rush back home with the news and probably got us all killed in the process, but I have some interesting news for Sherman about the Rihnans plans for dealing with us."

He went on and outlined all that he had learned from the Rihnan President, hoping that Murphy would not be too persistent as to how he had learned it, and long before he had finished there was a look of grimness on Murphy's face which made him fear what was to come after he had finished. His story ended, he said, " Well, that's the lot. Now tell me why you look so upset."

Murphy stirred uneasily. " Well, to begin with, they brought Wilson in from Earth to look at that disappearing trick, and he cracked it as easy as kiss your hand. When I left he had found out how to use it and how to allow a ship to move around as well under cover of the shield, just like your Rihnan pals."

" So ? "

" So they were working on conversion of the ships at Wilson's idea. It was quite simple and Sherman reckoned they'd have it done in less than two weeks."

" Phew ! That's moving some."

" He had to," Murphy leaned forward on one elbow as if to emphasise a point. " You see he was expecting reinforcements from Earth any day, and he wanted to use the combined fleets as soon as possible to make an attack in general on the rest of the Galaxy."

A cold hand gripped Brady's heart, and his appetite vanished as if it had never been. " How long before the attack ?" he asked.

" We were due back in seventeen days. The fleets were due to move in twenty-one. That gave us another three for emergencies, after that we were to be wiped off the slate as missing, believed destroyed."

Brady's face was white to the lips, " And now ?"

" I reckon we shall be five days late, sir."

Brady took a drink, hardly noticing that the liquid passed his lips. He realised that his information might never reach Sherman in time to help him. If he had told Murphy earlier—but no that would not have helped, even with a jury-rigged generator it would have taken them another five days and they would still have been too late.

" Do you know Sherman's plans ?" he asked suddenly. " Which way he was going ?"

" Sure. He was going to make a main thrust through the centre of the Galaxy, taking odd systems as he came to them and jumping from one to another until a full fleet battle was forced on him. That

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way he hoped to split the Galaxy in half and finish it off at leisure, but if what you say is true—"

"He'll hit one of the Rihnan fleets and have the other two outflank him before he knows what's hit him. Hell and damnation." Brady thumped the table with his fists and got up to look unseeingly out of the view port. "I reckon their numerical superiority at something over ten to one."

Murphy whistled, "As much as that?"

"Probably more."

They were silent for several long minutes, each trying to think of a solution to the problem. Murphy toyed with food that was suddenly repugnant to him and Brady stood unmoving by the viewport cursing the luck which had blown the screen circuit at such a vital moment. An old tag line ran through his brain mocking him, "For want of a nail the shoe was lost, for want of a shoe—" He cursed aloud and viciously, all the pleasure of his rescue ashes under the shattering blow his plans had received.

"We might try to intercept the fleets, sir," said Murphy suddenly. "If your information is correct then the Rihnan fleets will cover the Galactic centre proper, they won't bother about the fringe systems, they'll try and protect the heart of the Galaxy until their other two fleets come up to help them."

"That's true."

"It should take five or six days before the two fleets come into direct contact, given a bit of luck and no opposition we might make an interception in time."

Brady's lips were a thin line in his set, white face. Murphy was working on fractions, but if he was right they might just possibly do it. Anyway, it was worth a try.

"If you can get a day out of your chief engineer," he began.

"I'll get two," broke in Murphy grimly as he rose from the table. "I'll go and see him now."

There followed over twelve days of such concentrated work and endeavour as Brady had never known. Every man in the ship from himself and Murphy downwards was pressed into service for the repairs, but despite it all there were constant setbacks without which they would have finished well ahead of schedule. At a critical moment when they were hoping for only another day's work a nuclear-fission jet developed a fault which should never have been there and added three days to the work while it was put right. When he heard of it Murphy nearly went mad with rage and threatened to have the makers, back on Earth, on a charge of treason if he ever got back there safely.

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Their troubles were not confined solely to the repairs, for during the early part of their stay on the satellite they detected several vessels cruising at some distance from them, and the pattern of their movements clearly indicated that they were part of a scheme developed to hunt the ship which had ravaged the Tekronian system. There never appeared to be any danger of any of them searching the satellite, although their investigations on the planet itself seemed endless.

As the days passed and the repairs neared completion, it was the presence of these isolated, but by no means infrequent craft that worried both Brady and Murphy to an ever-increasing extent. In addition Murphy was worried about getting the ship home in one piece, but Brady gave most of his thoughts to deciding how much, of all that had happened to him, he should talk about. The information that was of strategic importance to the Terran fleets would have to be passed on to Admiral Sherman if he got the chance, but that regarding his own personal affairs was a different kettle of fish.

Brady had been careful, since he had returned to the company of his own race that no hint of his new mental stature should become apparent. His one embarrassing experience with Murphy had convinced him that while his powers would be useful to Earthmen, they could quite easily be a considerable source of embarrassment. He knew that his original explanations on the subject to anyone in authority would certainly be ridiculed at first, but that did not worry him unduly for he could easily prove the truth of his statements. What did worry him was the ultimate use to which these gifts might be put if they were utilised by the more unscrupulous members of his race; he was under no illusions that Man's chief claim to greatness rested first on his overpowering ambition and secondly to his curiosity. Benevolence was not among his major assets.

Brady decided, for the time being, to keep quiet and see what happened.

He was alone in the cabin which Murphy had given him, when there was a knock at the door and the Commander entered in response to his, " Come in."

Brady was sitting at the desk writing and he looked up and smiled as he saw Murphy standing beside him.

" It couldn't be good news at last, could it ?" he asked.

Murphy smiled grimly in return. " The Chief has just reported that we'll be ready in twelve hours," he replied. " The fission jet is fixed and has been tested. All we need to do now is straighten up for maximum efficiency and get out of here."

Brady pursed his lips and looked up at the deckhead, " ' The time has come,' the Walrus said, ' To talk of many things'," he quoted.

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"You can say that again, sir," Murphy sat down on the seat to which Brady motioned him.

"Yes, I guess we both mean the same thing," Brady relaxed and tapped the end of his stylopen pensively on the desk.

"Those ships buzzing about up there."

"Exactly."

"Well, with that information you've got burning a hole in your brain we'll have to get out pretty soon if we're going to do anything with it."

Brady nodded. "Yes, we can't afford to delay our departure any longer. I had hoped that after a fortnight they would have stopped looking for us and concluded that we managed to get out and away safely. I suppose that ship you destroyed didn't manage to get a message away before she crashed?"

Murphy shook his head decisively. "No, sir. We had a complete radio blanket down over all waves as soon as we knew the position. It would not have been possible."

"I thought not. Well, we must just accept it as a fact and try to overcome it."

"There's one possibility I've been thinking about, sir," Murphy began.

Brady nodded for him to continue, reflecting with some amusement that Murphy was still looking on him as his commanding officer instead of the passenger that he really was.

"It's obvious that when we do move we must move quickly," went on Murphy. "We can't get out of this crack in the rocks just to have a look round and then pop back in again if things don't look too healthy."

"Check."

"I suggest we send up a one-man tender which can move slowly and stands less chance of being spotted. It has all the necessary detecting equipment, and can easily dodge back if necessary."

"What if it's spotted?"

Murphy's lips tightened. "Well, if it is, it'll be obvious to the pilot of the tender and he will have orders not to come back."

There was a long minute of silence while the import of Murphy's plan sank in, then Brady nodded slowly.

"Suicide mission. Will the pilot do it?"

Murphy shifted uneasily. "Yes, I think we have someone who will volunteer."

"Yes, there usually is someone mad enough in any crew." Brady's tone was almost sad in the gentle way he said it. "How do we pick up the tender? After all, there isn't going to be much time to get it down here again, pick her up, and then blast off ourselves. That

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would take every bit of three minutes, and in three minutes a safe area could become a danger spot."

"I've thought of that, sir. Those tenders can travel fast for a short distance, almost half the speed of the parent ship, and if we can synchronise speeds for just thirty seconds—"

"A mid-space pick up, eh?"

"Exactly, sir."

Brady studied the floor between his feet for some seconds, then he remarked quietly, "You could lose the tender, there will be no time for a second try if the first attempt is unsuccessful."

"The pilot will be warned."

Brady sighed and stood up slowly. "You are the captain of this ship, as I have observed before, Commander. Anything you decide I shall, of course, agree to." He felt, as he said it, that he was refusing the responsibility which Murphy was offering him, but he knew there was no other way. He was just the passenger, and if Murphy asked his advice that he had to give it diplomatically.

Murphy, however, appeared relieved. He moved towards the door, and said, "Thank you, sir, I'll make the necessary arrangements."

The action bells rang through the vessel exactly eleven hours and forty minutes afterwards, waking Brady as he lay asleep in his bunk. He rose and pulled on his uniform, a borrowed one from Murphy's wardrobe, then he made his way up to the main control bridge. As he reached it he saw, through the forward view-port, the slim, small shape of the tender as it manoeuvred its way slowly and carefully out of the rocky chasm that had served as a repair shop for nearly two weeks. Murphy was watching it as it went.

He turned as Brady entered the bridge and Barton moved unobtrusively away from his side to make way for Brady.

"Tender has just left sir," reported Murphy.

"So I see," replied Brady. "I hope the pilot is lucky."

Murphy touched a switch on the board in front of him that cut in the remote control units on the ships main drive. Brady recognised the emergency move which had been made, and mentally commended Murphy for it. To switch power by manual means to the drive would mean loss of valuable seconds while the order was transmitted to the power room. That was all right during normal operations, but now, the use of the remote control units could give them those vital seconds which might mean the difference between success and failure.

The speaker on the bulkhead beside them droned suddenly and metallically. "Donovan here. Donovan calling Control."

"Tender's pilot," Murphy informed him briefly as he snapped over a switch. "Go ahead, Donovan, Murphy here."

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"Donovan," went on the speaker. "I'm level with the top of the hole, sir, and I'm moving up slowly. No warning on the detectors yet . . . I'm fifty feet up, still nothing . . . five hundred feet—nothing."

Tension seemed to mount in the control room, for everyone knew that the higher the tender went up the more vulnerable it was to detection itself, and it needed only one spark on any alien screen within a few million miles, and it would be all up for Donovan and his tiny craft, and possibly for them as well.

"I'm giving him up to ten thousand feet," said Murphy. "He'll have practically three hundred degree coverage by then and that should be good enough."

Brady nodded but said nothing.

"Five thousand," reported Donovan. "No signs. I'm going out faster now. Eight thousand, still nothing."

Murphy's face was grim as he punched a pattern of buttons on the remote control unit. A dull, steady rumble began to surge through the great hull as power was fed into the drive generators, and Brady could feel life pulsing through what had, a few moments before, been an inanimate hulk of metal. It was as if a giant was awakening beneath them, and was stretching his limbs in preparation for rising. The jagged sides of the chasm began to move slowly past them as the ship lifted itself from the smooth surface of the rock below it.

Brady hoped that Murphy was not being too precipitous.

Donovan's voice came suddenly through the speaker. "Ten thousand feet, all clear. I'm heading out fast and awaiting pickup. Out."

Murphy grunted unintelligibly, and as Brady looked at him he could see the sweat of concentration on his grimly-set face and he knew that the grunt had been involuntarily reaction to the strain of the manoeuvre. The sides of the chasm ended abruptly and they could see the surface of the satellite stretching away on all sides, dark and uninviting. Murphy's hand shifted confidently over the board and they moved faster now, the prow of the vessel lifting and pointing out into the starlit depths ahead of them. On the screen Brady could see the tiny dot of the fleeing tender, it was travelling much faster than them but they would catch up with it very soon.

Murphy spoke almost softly into the intercom. "All hands, all hands. Prepare for maximum drive acceleration in one minute."

The dot on the screen was coming back towards them now as the ship gathered speed, and Brady realised what a tricky manoeuvre it would be to pick up the tender at such a speed, and from Murphy's face he too, realised it.

Speed mounted as Murphy fed more power to the drive units and

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in a few seconds the tender loomed large on the screen ahead of them. Looking out of the view port Brady could see it not a great distance ahead, a tiny speck glistening against the black background of space.

"Stand by to pick up tender," Murphy's voice was quiet and almost soothing as he gave the order, and back along the hull of the ship Brady could visualise the space-suited team standing by the open hatch with the grapple magnets ready to draw the speeding speck inside to its resting place amidships. In seconds it was just ahead of them travelling only slightly slower as Donovan matched his speed with that of the parent ship. It dropped back slowly, moving nearer to the bigger craft which was still increasing its speed. It passed slowly back in sight all the time from the control room, and from its movements Brady could see that Donovan was jockeying it as close to the parent ship as he could to make the pickup easier.

Murphy was staring straight ahead, obviously not wishing to see what was going on to the rear of him, and Brady did not blame him, for his judgment might well be affected by what he saw. It was better that he should wait for progress reports over the intercom.

Brady turned back in time to see the grapples shoot across the intervening space to the smaller ship they seemed to hang for a moment and then, suddenly, they bridged the gap so that the tender was fixed to the parent ship as if by an umbilical cord. Brady let out a deep breath as he saw the hardest part of the operation safely completed.

The tender drew nearer and nearer to the hatch until it was partly obscured by the curve of the hull, and then it was gone, clicking into place like part of a giant jigsaw puzzle.

As he turned away Brady heard the intercom buzz. "Tender stowed, hatch secured and cleared away."

Murphy's fingers hit another series of buttons in front of him and the acceleration swayed them slightly as the stars ahead became moving specks instead of the stationary dots which they had been before. The drive took over completely and Brady could see the blue star, Tekrir, drop away behind them.

Beside him Murphy drew a long, deep breath, and stepped back from the control board.

"You can take over now, Mister Barton," he said to the second officer who came to take his place. "Call me if necessary, I shall be in Captain Brady's cabin."

He moved to the door, and Brady followed him. They had been spaceborne just two minutes and fifteen seconds and it felt like twenty years, but, one way or another, they were on their way back, and Brady met Murphy's smile with one that matched it in relief, for the immediate danger was passed.

To be concluded.

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FILM REVIEW

FORBIDDEN PLANET

Starring Walter Pidgeon, Anne Francis and Leslie Nielson
For General Release in July. *Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.*

I never thought that I would see the day when a truly first-class science fiction film would be presented on the screen—especially after the many abortive attempts from Hollywood in recent months, but favourable comments from American colleagues regarding M-G-M's *Forbidden Planet* prompted me to see an advance screening. I am more than glad that I did not miss it. In ninety-eight visual minutes Director Fred McLeod Wilcox has captured on celluloid *and* in glorious colour the type of story you read in this or any other leading magazine which has devoted years to perfecting science fiction.

The plot itself involves three fundamentals which have long been favourites—galactic travel, alien entities, and a robot (even author Isaac Asimov would be proud of the latter), but the three subjects are so ably handled that the entire film never once enters the realm of pure corn. It centres round a Space Patrol ship visiting a distant planetary system to locate a missing expedition, all of whom are dead except Dr. Morbius (Walter Pidgeon) and his daughter Altaira (Anne Francis)—but Dr. Morbius has found the age-old laboratories of the original inhabitants, the Krell, and is slowly unravelling the secrets of their super-science. And super-science it really is for the special effects department have built up a fine example of an advanced technology, against backdrops of alien landscape that would do even Bonestell credit.

Yet behind the peace of this distant planet there lies an alien entity, an Evil Force, invisible, almost invincible—at only one point in the film is its vague outlines shown as it absorbs huge concentrations of atomic energy and still survives. This is a truly gripping scene. But it is the technical effects, the magnificent scenery and the " electronic tonalities " in lieu of a musical background which puts the viewer into another world.

Special effects were done by the Disney Studios and are as much responsible for the films success as the Director and Producer for never once letting the human side get out of hand. There is a little " mush " at one period, when Altaira first meets the men of the Space Patrol, but even this is played down and one feels that the actress's decorative legs in an otherwise all-male picture make a pleasant change from the stupendous gadgetry of the long-extinct Krell.

On no account miss this film. J.C.

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